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FIFTEENTH THOUSAND

HIS LAST PASSION



A SENSATIONAL AND REALISTIC STORY OF ENGLISH
MODERN LIFE



BY MARTIUS

EDITED BY THE AUTHOR OF "UNSATISFIED"

NEW YORK
THE MINERVA PUBLISHING COMPANY
48 University Place

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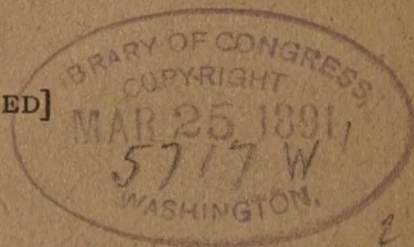
EDITED BY THE AUTHOR OF "UNSATISFIED"

40 Minerva

*"Où est à ceste heure, la fleur de ma vie, fleur coupée par cet estuy
feminin comme par ciseauxx."—DE BALZAC*

"Sin let loose speaks punishment at hand."—COWPER

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DEDICATION.

TO most men it is permitted, at least once in their lives, to meet a true woman; no angel, no fairy, no impossible creation of the poet's fancy, but a woman subject to human passions, to human temptations, to human weaknesses, and yet so far above the majority of her sisters that the man who wins her friendship or her love, however unfortunate his surroundings may have been, must of necessity gain a higher opinion of her whole sex, and feel himself drawn towards nobler aspirations. To such a woman I dedicate this book.

THE AUTHOR.

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PREFACE.

"*Ce n'est plus de l'imagination, c'est de la deduction comme chez les savants.*" This sentence of Emile Zola's in his "*Roman Experimental*," embodying, as it does, his idea of what a novel should be in order to be in any way useful, is the guide which I have set before me in writing this story.

I have taken certain characters, I have brought them in contact with each other. I have considered the *milieu* in which they moved, and then I have thought out what must be the result of the action and reaction of those particular idiosyncracies upon one another, and I have written down the logical conclusion, resolved to tell *la verité vraie*, even at the risk of marring a dramatic situation or of incurring the critic's displeasure.

It may be objected to me that I have not described a single perfect character. My answer is that perfect characters are rare, especially in such a set as I have chosen. It must not be supposed that I would libel modern society by implying that all coteries are so corrupt as that into which I have introduced the reader. On the contrary, I am aware that there are many sets existing now in London

in which a woman like Ella Macleod would have developed into a useful and loveable wife and mother—especially under the guidance of some man of stronger principle than Ronald Macleod.

Of my heroine—if such a title will apply to Lady Atherley—I may say that there are women enough of her stamp to excuse my choosing her as a type and yet I trust they are not so plentiful that every reader of this book shall be able to name one of his acquaintances who bears a strong resemblance to her.

From an ethical point of view, I know that it would have been better to bring upon my characters a greater punishment than I have done. But I write for men and women of the world, who know that comparatively few *liaisons* lead to a public scandal with all its bitter consequences. Probably every man and woman who treads the dangerous path of a guilty love thinks at the outset that he or she will have sufficient cleverness to avoid discovery, but I have endeavoured to show that even where a home is not roughly broken up, all happiness may be and often is banished from it by dallying with temptation.

“Where lives the man that has not tried
How mirth can into folly glide
And folly into sin?”

SCOTT.

HIS LAST PASSION.

CHAPTER I.

DEFEAT.

IN the vestry room of Sandborough, at a long table covered with green baize, which had become black round the edges from the countless inkstains of a generation of careless parish officials, sat nine men. In front of the raised desk in the centre of the table was a small heap of flimsy-looking printed papers, while on each side of this centre heap lay an equal number of small rolls of similar papers, with an elastic band round all.

"Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine! I only make forty-nine in this bundle. Will you count them yourself, Mr. Mayor?" asked a little man with a grizzled beard and gold-rimmed spectacles, rising from his seat and handing the bundle to a grave energetic looking man of forty or forty-five, who sat behind the raised desk in the centre of the table.

Placing his left hand in the edge of the bundle and wetting the forefinger of his right hand, the Mayor of Sandborough rapidly, but deliberately, ran through the papers. "There are fifty here," said he, "I find it correct," at the same time handing the bundle to one of the overseers of the borough sitting on his left hand, who counted the papers one by one in a monotonous voice till he came to "Fifty."

"Are you satisfied, gentlemen?" asked the Mayor, leaning back in his chair, with a look of resignation.

"I should like to count them myself," said a little man with a very fresh complexion, large prominent

eyes, sleek black hair, and a nose which told plainly of his descent from the most ancient people in the world.

"Well, Mr. Pilsener, as one of the candidates for this borough, you have the right to do so, though it seems to me rather useless," said the Mayor. "However, as you please," and he handed the bundle across the table to Mr. Pilsener with a gesture of impatience.

But the Liberal candidate for Sandborough was not a man to be abashed by any gestures whatever, and he calmly set to work, not only to count the voting papers, but also to examine each one carefully, turning it over, holding it up to the light, and, in fact, subjecting it to the most minute scrutiny.

"It is correct, as I feared it would be," he exclaimed, after he had finished his examination and handed the papers back with a smile, which was particularly addressed to the Mayor, but which also included all those present.

"So far the numbers are remarkably near," said the Mayor, with a sigh of relief, "and I trust our task is nearly over. I make it at present 401 for Mr. Macleod and 397 for Mr. Pilsener; but there are still the spoiled votes—nineteen of them, I think. We must now examine them." Then he took up the small heap in the centre of the table, and after examining each paper with the greatest care, he handed it first to the overseers and afterwards to the agents of the candidates, and lastly to the candidates themselves; and when everyone had made his remarks upon them, they were delivered back to him, and he gave his decision. "This one is signed with the voter's initials; it is disallowed. This one has the cross just outside the square, but it is evident that the voter intended to give his vote to Mr. Pilsener; I must accept it. Another, evidently intended for Mr. Pilsener, though the cross is not quite in the right place; this must count. Here is one on which the voter has put a cross against each name—he has had so much doubt about the matter that we can have none. It is void." And so on till the nineteen had all been disposed of. "Of these votes," said the Mayor, "eight are undoubtedly bad, but the remaining eleven are evidently *bonâ fide* votes, and show unmistakably for whom they are intended; so that I think it my duty to

count them. There are two for Mr. Macleod and nine for Mr. Pilsener, making the totals for Mr. Macleod 403 and for Mr. Pilsener 406; so that if both candidates are satisfied, I shall proceed to declare Mr. Pilsener duly elected. At the same time, either candidate is at liberty to have the votes counted again, should he desire it."

"I should prefer to have them examined again," said Mr. Macleod, standing up, "for though I have every confidence in the correctness of the counting, still the numbers are so very near that it is just possible there may be a mistake."

Though his voice sounded clearly through the room, yet a slight tremor might have been detected in it, and an almost imperceptible flush rose to his cheeks. He was a tall slight man of thirty-five, though he looked fully five years younger. His eyes were large and almost black, his nose straight and delicately cut, except that the nostrils were a little too wide. His upper lip, which was shaded by a rather heavy but silky moustache, might have served as a model for a sculptor, but a fullness about the under lip gave an air of sensuality to the whole face, which would otherwise have been exceedingly refined. His appearance was somewhat unusual, the lips being very red, the hair black—with the peculiar blackness of unmixed Celtic descent—and the face so pale that its pallor would have been almost disagreeable had it not been for the extreme transparency of the skin, upon which his thirty-five years had scarcely written a wrinkle, except a very deeply marked one which commenced between his eyebrows and ran upwards almost to the roots of his hair. His whiskers were scarcely an inch long, but his hair was rather longer than any young man about town would consider correct, and in his dress he already affected that quiet style which is more usual with men at least ten years his senior.

He wore a black frock coat, a turned down collar with a black and white check necktie tied in a bow—rather wide trousers of dark grey, and clumsy-looking shoes which succeeded in making a very neat foot look broad, flat, and ugly. In short, it was easy

to see that he took little thought about his personal appearance. Indeed, he considered that if a man's face were closely shaved, and his linen spotless, it mattered little his coat being somewhat worn, or his trousers rather baggy at the knees. Though his hands were small and his fingers long and tapering, they were particularly muscular. He wore no rings or other jewellery.

His father, General Macleod, had won some renown in the Crimea, and been rewarded with the title of K.C.B., a distinction which in his estimation added little to the honour of his name and lineage—a lineage in which every link was authenticated by the family muniments, and which carried him back to Robert the Bruce in a direct line. But though the General's pedigree was in so satisfactory a condition, his estate was much encumbered, and he had felt the inconvenience of poverty—not of that poverty which makes a man realise the beauty of the familiar prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” but the poverty which, as some one has said, sends its sons to Harrow and Cambridge instead of to Eton and the Guards. So it happened with Sir Hugh Macleod's eldest son. He had gone to Harrow, and afterwards had obtained a commission in the “Black Watch,” but when it came to educating his second son Ronald, who was considerably younger, the old General had been obliged to send him to some less expensive school, and, notwithstanding his old-fashioned prejudice that the army, the navy, and the church were the only professions fit for a gentleman, he had reluctantly accepted the offer of a brother officer to place his boy in the office of Messrs. Thompson and Haroldson, the well-known agents in the City. Ronald Macleod, who had imbibed some of his father's ideas, had at first looked down with no small degree of contempt upon his profession, but the ceaseless chaff to which his fellow clerks had subjected him had taught him to modify his opinions, especially when he found that several of the men with whom he was brought into hourly contact were perfectly gentleman-like in their manners, and that some of them were actually possessed of grandfathers. Thus by the time he had attained his twentieth year he had made

up his mind to make the best of the position into which circumstances had thrown him; and when, a few months later, his father died, he had realised what small fortune the old General had been able to leave him, and had deposited the money with the senior partner of his house, and told him that he had now given up his dream of looking out for "something better," and would be very glad if his money could be invested in the business.

Mr. Thompson, who had heard how Ronald used always to tell his companions that he had only accepted his clerkship in order to have "something to do while he was looking about him," smiled as he told him that at least three-fourths of the young men who came into the house looked upon it as a sort of temporary shelter, but that those who left it seldom did so of their own free will. "I will ask my partners if they will permit you to lend them this money," he added, "and I have no doubt that they will accede to your request; and if you really settle down to your work, and make yourself useful, it is possible that fifteen or twenty years hence you may be taken into partnership."

From that moment Ronald Macleod had a purpose in life. The fifteen or twenty years' probation, long as they seemed to a man of his age, did not frighten him. He was determined to work and become a partner in the house—not that such a consummation was the end of his hopes, on the contrary he only looked forward to it as a beginning to his career—as the means of getting money sufficient to enable him to stand for some borough—in the Conservative interest of course—for had not his ancestors been Cavaliers, Jacobites, Tories, from the beginning? "And once in Parliament," he used to think, "who can tell?" and then his fancy would soar aloft with all the impetuosity of his twenty years. Hitherto his object had been to get his work done as quickly as possible. Henceforth he cared less for rapidity of execution so long as it were done well, and though he took a fair share of the amusements and enjoyments which modern London offers to a man of his age, half-past nine in the morning found him seated at his desk with

his mind as steadily fixed on his work as if he had gone to bed at ten the night before, instead of having had only four or five hours' sleep and a bath to fit him for the duties of the day.

This steady application on his part was not the fancy of a moment, nor was it long before Mr. Thompson and his partners observed it. As vacancies occurred among the clerks he was promoted higher and higher till at length, on the 1st of January, 1880, he was taken into the business as junior partner with a share of the profits, which amounted only to about a thousand a year at that time, but which promised on the revival of business to increase very rapidly and substantially.

When on the 8th March, in the same year, Lord Beaconsfield astonished the country by his sudden dissolution of Parliament, Macleod, who had for some years past taken an active part in local politics, accepted the invitation of the Conservative Committee at Sandborough to come forward as their candidate, and, contrary to the advice of his partners, who recommended him to wait a few years longer, and with some misgivings as to how his election expenses could be met, he had taken up his quarters at the Blue Boar at Sandborough, and thrown himself heart and soul into the contest.

His canvass had been eminently satisfactory, and a week before the polling day he reckoned pretty confidently on getting a majority of at least 150. But day by day, as the results of the elections were declared with the same monotonous account of victories won by the Liberals, he noticed a change in the manner of many of his lukewarm supporters, and his heart had sunk within him as he reflected on the unreliableness of voters' most solemn promises, and on the damage which he firmly believed would be done to British prestige if that "mischievous maniac," the "People's William," were to be placed at the head of affairs.

When the 7th of April arrived, the day fixed for the poll, Macleod had done all that man could do. From seven in the morning till the close of the poll, his carriage and pair had been seen driving backwards and forwards through the town, his wife and daughter (a fair-haired child of ten) dressed in blue from head to

foot, with blue parasols, blue boots, blue gloves, even blue flowers, and, in the child's case, turquoise earrings. The horses (changed three times during the day), the coachman, and footman, were decked out with blue bows innumerable. How Macleod could contrive to let his cigar out in time to stop and get a light at each tobacconist's shop was scarcely less astonishing than the manner in which Mrs. Macleod's glove-buttons required sewing on as the carriage passed any haberdasher's, or the rapidity with which the child disposed of the cakes and sweetmeats which were purchased for her at the three confectioners. But all this activity availed not, and Ronald was beaten. It was not with any idea of altering the total against him that he had asked to have the votes counted again, for he knew that the Mayor was an ardent Conservative, and that he must have scrutinised every opposition vote as closely as he could have done himself, but he felt that he wanted a few moments to pull himself together before he met the crowd of electors who were waiting outside; and then, too, he felt what a disappointment it would be to his wife. She had helped him cordially in his canvass, and only that morning she had predicted his success so confidently that he felt he would hate to let her hear the announcement of his defeat so publicly amidst the shouts of an unsympathetic crowd. He walked to the window and looked out. He could see the people waiting below—rather impatient now, as the announcement had been expected fully an hour before. There were his wife and daughter, too, in the carriage, just opposite the window. It was a cold morning, and the horses were walking up and down in front of the Town Hall, and he had to wait fully five minutes before his wife chanced to see him. She looked up with a glance so full of hope and triumph that he felt his own disappointment in the result of the election was nothing in comparison to what she would suffer. But there was no alternative; she must learn the bad news sooner or later. As the carriage passed he looked at her earnestly, then shook his head, and held up three fingers. She understood him instantly. For a moment her eyebrows became arched, and her mouth half opened; and

then all the colour left her cheeks, and she bit her lip. When the carriage was just beyond the thickest part of the crowd she stood up and told the coachman to drive to the hotel. But before she reached the door she thought that perhaps it would seem ungenerous to leave him alone at such a moment and she ordered the man to drive back again. Once more she passed the Town Hall, but as she looked up at the window where her husband had been standing a few minutes before she seemed to understand that, hard as would be the task which would fall upon him of addressing the electors, the fact of her being there would make it still harder for him. Then her eyes filled with tears and she drove to the Blue Boar, where she had everything ready for returning home. She wrote on a card:—

“MY DEAREST RONALD,—I can’t tell you how awfully sorry I am. Come home as soon as you can get away. My poor old fellow.

“YOUR LOVING WIFIE.”

Leaving this with the hotel keeper, she returned to town by the next train.

In the meantime the Conservative agent had looked through the Liberal votes again, and, finding none to object to, he had signified to the Mayor that he must accept the defeat, which could not be avoided.

CHAPTER II.

ELECTION HUMOURS.

MACLEOD walked across to his opponent and held out his hand, saying, “I congratulate you, Mr. Pilsener. I fear the victory has fallen to the better orator, and not to the better cause.”

Mr. Pilsener seemed somewhat surprised at this proceeding, but he put a soft fat hand into Macleod’s,

and said, "Thank you, Mr. Macleod; thank you. We must all have our own opinions about that."

A sound of many voices from the expectant crowd was wafted in at the window.

"Let us go on to the balcony," said the Mayor; "the people are getting impatient."

As the Mayor with the candidates and one or two privileged friends of each of them stepped out on the balcony, a confused murmur arose from the crowd below—a murmur which almost immediately gave way to a breathless hush of expectation, while hundreds of faces were turned inquiringly towards the balcony. Both candidates had so far mastered their emotions that the most careful observer was unable to guess which of them was victorious. The Mayor, who hated all ceremonies and always got through his business as quickly as he possibly could, at once rose to his feet, and, without any sort of prelude or introduction whatever, merely said:

"The numbers recorded in the returns are: For Mr. Pilsener, 406; for Mr. Macleod, 403. The majority for Mr. Pilsener is therefore three votes, and accordingly I declare Mr. Samuel Jacob Pilsener to be duly elected and returned member of Parliament for the borough of Sandborough in the ensuing Parliament."

This announcement was greeted with immense cheering, in which many a burgher who had given his vote in favour of the Conservative candidate joined lustily—not that he had thus suddenly altered his political opinions, but merely because enthusiasm is catching, and it is so pleasant to shout when a hundred other voices are keeping us in countenance.

Mr. Pilsener then stood forward and bowed with a peculiarly oleaginous smile, his fat little hands threatening to burst through the tight lavender kids into which he had managed to thrust them, as he placed the fingers of his right hand one by one in the palm of his left, and gave them each a hearty squeeze of congratulation. As soon as the cheering with which he was greeted had subsided, he said:—

"Gentlemen, before I offer you my warmest and most grateful thanks for the unbounded distinction which you have just conferred upon me, I must obey

the first impulse of my heart by congratulating you upon the glorious advance which you have this day made towards the ulterior triumphs of the human race. Yes, gentlemen, there is something far grander than the difference between Whig and Tory, Liberal and Conservative; there is the glorious future; your grand inheritance of intellectuality working in amicable co-ordination with honourable and admiration-compelling labour."

"Is he drunk?" asked one of Mr. Pilsener's chief supporters, in some alarm.

"Oh, no, it is all right," answered another friend of the new member, "this doesn't mean anything, and it will please the crowd, for it sounds well; besides, he has sent a copy of his speech to the reporters and told them not to notice what he actually says, as that is the substance of what he is going to say, and as all the regular reporters of the chief journals are occupied elsewhere we can rely on his written version appearing in the papers."

Mr. Pilsener was right. This sort of thing did please the crowd, and he was greeted with tremendous cheering directly he made a pause.

No one understood what he was saying, but some thought they had missed out a word somewhere, and others were pleased that their new member should consider them worthy of such high-flown eloquence. On all sides the general approval found vent in such remarks as, "Don't he speak beautiful?" "I c'd lissen to 'im orl day, I could."

One or two electors did venture to ask what he was talking about, but they were admonished not to show their ignorance, or to pay more attention and not to interrupt.

Mr. Pilsener made a few remarks disparaging to the late Conservative Government, a few vague promises of the important reforms to be enacted by the Liberals, and he interspersed these with several grandiloquent sentences as meaningless as the one with which he opened his speech.

All this was poured out in a low, persuasive tone (which, nevertheless, reached the ears of the farthest listeners), with one hand thrust into his bosom, and the

other now raised deprecatingly, and now swayed smoothly from side to side, except where his language soared above the range of common sense, and then he would raise both his hands and his eyes to heaven, while his voice would swell out for the moment like the note of some distant organ.

"A manner and a speech like that," said the Mayor, bending down and speaking in a whisper to Macleod, "is worth at least twenty or thirty votes with a suffrage so low as that now in existence."

When the new member for Sandborough had regained his seat, and Macleod had risen to his feet, several moments passed before he could obtain sufficient quiet to be heard. While he waited he looked around, and noted with satisfaction that his wife had left the place. He had prepared, in his mind, the outline of two speeches which he intended to deliver according to the result of the election. Still, as he began to speak, he found that he had completely forgotten them both, and therefore he said:—

"Gentlemen, to those of you who have supported me I offer my sincerest thanks. If all the Conservatives in this borough had voted as honestly as you have the result would have been different to-day. To those Conservatives who have not done their best it will be a constant source of useless regret to remember that had they brought but four more votes to the poll every important division in the House of Commons would have counted two more in case of a majority for the Conservatives and two less in case our side should be in a minority." "As it always will," called out a butcher, and then laughed so boisterously at his joke that several others joined in his laughter.

"I will not attempt to disguise from you," Macleod continued, "that in my defeat to-day I see the fall of one of my dearest personal ambitions. But, do not mistake me, the failure of any personal hope falls into insignificance when I think of the evil days which some of you, and many voters in other constituencies, are thoughtlessly bringing upon England. So many elections have now been decided, that I see, alas! too clearly that the new Parliament will contain a majority, though I trust a small majority, of Liberal members."

Here the speaker was interrupted by a perfect tempest of cheers, hisses, and cries of "A large majority," "The Tories are out of it," etc., etc.

"And do you know," continued Macleod, his voice ringing out loud and clear above the tumult, "what a Liberal majority means? It means Mr. Gladstone as Prime Minister."

Derisive cheers again drowned Macleod's words. One voice cried out, "And a good Prime Minister, too"; but the greater number of the people yelled out that "it is nonsense," that "Mr. Gladstone has given up the business," "Gladstone don't want hoffice."

When a certain degree of order was restored, Macleod went on—

"Mark my words," said he, "I know enough of Mr. Gladstone to tell you that he will be at the head of affairs or nowhere, and that if once he holds the destinies of this empire in his hand, from that moment 'security of property' and 'British prestige' will be meaningless words."

Amidst a storm of cheers and hisses he sat down. The blood rushed to his temples, his hands felt clammy and his feet cold. His part in the battle was over. For a few minutes he was conscious of the confused noise of the crowd below. Then some one addressed the people—he did not notice who—and after that he mechanically rose to his feet and with the rest of the party left the balcony. A minute or two later he heard the cheers which greeted Mr. Pilsener as he drove off. The crowd still lingered outside. Rough jests were interchanged, and a good deal of laughter was heard; all seemed good humour and satisfaction.

"I am sorry for Macleod," said a hairdresser, "I thought he made a very manly, straightforward speech."

"Yes," answered a fishmonger, "mebbe so, but there haint much of hedication about 'im; now, Pilsener, yer know, 'e's a scollard, ez hanyone kin see with 'arf a heye; wy, as fur wot Mikleeod sed, me or you might a sed it jest as well. I don't care tuppence fur Conservative or Liberal, I don't. What I likes fur a member o' Parlyment is a man wot kin speak hortigraphicul."

This harangue was very well received by the bystanders.

"Well," said the hairdresser, somewhat disdainfully, "I don't care for 'hortigraphicul speaking' so much as for principles."

"And I s'pose that's wot you voted fur," said the fishmonger, rather nettled by the manner of the hairdresser, and a little soured in his temper by the large quantities of beer which had, in some mysterious manner, been distributed with singular generosity at every public-house in the borough during the last few days.

"I voted for Macleod, and I ain't ashamed to own it," answered the hairdresser, with some dignity.

"Did yer?" retorted the fishmonger, suddenly firing up, "then take that," and he thrust his fist into the hairdresser's eye.

The hairdresser did not feel equal to the task of punishing his antagonist, so he simply walked off, with his hand to his eye, amidst the jeers of some of the bystanders. But he was not a man to bear this indignity tamely. Besides, his eye smarted. So when, a minute later, he noticed a little man with a yellow riband in his button-hole, he went up and asked him what he thought of the result.

"Glorious, ain't it?" chuckled the little man.

"Oh, you think so?" and the hairdresser passed on the affront which he had just received with interest.

Several of the crowd thought this joke which the fishmonger had originated so exceedingly telling and funny that it had quite a success for a few minutes until some people beginning to find it monotonous, it was laid aside and a sort of free fight ensued, in which the combatants were not very particular as to whom they hit so long as they hit some one. The Mayor, who was just leaving the Town Hall, despatched a messenger to the police station, but in a few minutes the fight ended as suddenly as it had begun, and the crowd quietly dispersed. A few minutes later Ronald Macleod crossed the open place in front of the Town Hall and entered his chief committee room.

It was a large room with a dirty uncarpeted floor, a long table reaching from one end to the other was

covered with inkstands, quill pens, and heaps of addresses and political tracts issued by different influential Conservatives. There was only one chair in the room, but benches were placed along each side of the table and round the walls. The only attempt at ornamentation in the place consisted of several framed hunting prints, which, however, were now covered over by lists of the various committees wafered to the glass.

On the walls, which had once been pink, but were so stained and dirty that they had assumed a nameless colour, were pinned several large posters printed in blue capitals, and telling the electors to "poll early," to "vote for Macleod," and to "mark your voting paper thus," with a diagram initiating intelligent voters into the mysteries of making a cross opposite the right candidate's name—mysteries which might be imagined to require no explanation did not actual experience teach us that five or six per cent. of the voters who are qualified to have a voice in deciding as to whether England should or should not go to war for some specific reason, are at the same time unable to make a cross in a particular space provided for the purpose.

In smaller type were to be found telling extracts from newspapers, showing what had been done by the Conservatives, or proving that Lord Beaconsfield's finance had been infinitely more advantageous to English taxpayers than Mr. Gladstone's. Then there were pictures, too, if the political squibs of the day could be dignified by such a name. Cartoons from the comic papers were exhibited, in which the leaders of the two great parties were each represented with particularly square noses, small eyes, and in impossible attitudes, but where the initiated might distinguish Lord Beaconsfield by the protrusion of the under lip, the tuft on the chin, and the curl on the forehead, and Mr. Gladstone might be recognised by the sparse hairs on the head and with more certainty by the axe which he held in his hand.

There were also one or two caricatures from Scotland, in which Lord Rosebery was an important figure, either as a little dog or as a Highland lad—squibs which contained little wit in themselves, but to which

Mr. Gladstone was weak enough to lend some importance by publicly showing his annoyance at them. Then there was a brightly-coloured "serio-comic map," a caricature which preserved the contour of the British Isles, and prophesied, with a want of foresight which was perhaps pardonable at the time, the triumph of Lord Beaconsfield (curl on forehead, tuft on chin, and earl's coronet and robes this time to make quite sure) over Lord Hartington and Mr. Gladstone—figures which, having found it impossible to keep strictly to the outline of the surrounding coast line, had renounced all likeness to the human form rather than abandon the attempt.

The only person in the room was an old man of almost seventy, who was sitting on the solitary chair at the end of the table with a curiously furrowed and trouble-worn face buried in his hands. As soon as he heard Macleod's step on the floor he started up respectfully and came forward to greet him.

"I am so sorry, sir, oh, so sorry," he said in a broken voice, while the tears chased one another down his cheeks.

"Come, cheer up, Mr. Terbage," said Macleod, pressing the old man's hand kindly, "we are beaten, it is true, but we must make the best of it."

"Yes, sir, but it is so hard: you have lost a seat in Parliament, sir, but you are young and can wait a few years, and then most likely attain to your ambition; but I am too old. I was a prosperous man once, sir, and might have had a son in Parliament, but the commercial crisis of 1866 left me penniless, and my son, who had just entered into partnership with me, never seemed to get on afterwards. He and his wife both died in a few years—died, sir, in absolute want of all the necessaries of life, and left a boy to my charge. I make a few shillings by copying work, but I am old and broken down now. I had so counted on your getting in, sir—and then as I worked hard for you, I thought you could not refuse to get my grandson appointed messenger in some Government office, so that he might have been safe for something for the rest of his life; but all my hopes are gone now, sir," and the poor old fellow sobbed aloud.

"Are you a voter?" asked Macleod.

"No, sir."

"Thank God for that," said Macleod, "then I can't be called in question for bribery;" and he thrust a couple of sovereigns into the old clerk's hand, and made a memorandum in his pocket-book as to Mr. Terbage's address, and his ambition with regard to his grandson.

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Terbage, a little cheered by the certainty that for a month his grandson could have enough to eat now. "Talking of bribery, sir, I had almost forgot to tell you that Mr. Pilsener gave my landlord a sovereign with his own hand when he was canvassing, and said it was for an old teapot which he had a fancy to put in his collection of old china, when I knew all the time the pot wasn't ten years old, and had cost about three shillings."

At this moment a tall gentleman-like looking man burst into the room, calling out cheerfully, "Never mind, Macleod, it is almost a win."

"Stop a minute, Stewart, here is Mr. Terbage with information for you which may make it quite a win."

Mr. Terbage and Mr. Stewart talked together for a few minutes, and then the latter exclaimed: "We may not be able to give you the seat, Macleod, but if we don't turn that d—— smooth-tongued Israelite out of it I'll be hanged if I ever act as an election agent again. Come and have lunch now; you must want it."

As soon as luncheon was over Macleod took leave of some of his chief supporters, who accompanied him to the station. He was wrapped in deep thought all the way up to town, and was only awakened from his reverie by hearing the porters calling, "Victoria! Victoria!" As he stepped on to the platform, a handsome young fellow of about seven-and-twenty, dressed in an admirably-fitting "Melton" coat, buttoning up so high as almost to conceal a pale, drab tie and gold horseshoe pin, and trousers so tight that they seemed to have been painted on to him, rushed forward and grasped his hand warmly.

"What, you here, Charlie?"

"Yes, and I hear what the porters are calling out, 'Victoria.' I hope it is a good omen. Shall I give

three cheers?" and Charlie Fausterleigh took off a very glossy hat with his left hand, in which he already held an ebony and silver-mounted crutch-stick.

"No," said Macleod, quietly; "it is 'defeat.'"

"Well, I'm d——," muttered Fausterleigh, and his face fell as naturally as if he had not heard of his friend's defeat before.

But he had.

CHAPTER III.

A DINNER.

WHEN Macleod reached his home his wife came into the hall to meet him.

"Poor old Ronald" was all she said, and she put her hands on his shoulders and held up her face to him to kiss.

They walked into his study, where he flung himself on a sofa. She sat down in an arm-chair beside him. She was a fair little woman, with glistening golden hair, blue eyes which looked cold and almost gray in the dull daylight of the gloomy study, but which deepened into dark violet beneath the softening rays of a well-lighted ball-room or dinner-table. Her cheeks, upon which, perhaps, too many roses bloomed, told plainly that Mrs. Macleod had not changed her nationality when she changed her name. Her nose, though rather small, was well shaped, and her whole face would have been pretty and doll-like but for a certain disdainful curl of the upper lip and a massiveness of the under jaw, which made her admirers feel that it might not be quite safe to treat her altogether as a plaything, and which, it must be owned, rather marred what would otherwise have been a most charming little face.

Added to this her teeth, which were as regular as if they had been made by machinery, were of a tint to

awaken the admiration of a dentist rather than of an amateur of beauty. Her figure, though very small, was so nearly perfect that she and her husband might be excused for thinking it absolutely so, especially now that a skilful dressmaker and the modern style of dress combined to show it off to the best advantage. She was on the point of attaining her thirty-second birthday, but the extreme slightness of her figure and the fairness of her complexion would have enabled her to pass very well for three or four and twenty, if she had kept her two children, a boy of fourteen and a girl of ten, out of the way.

"You know," she said, stretching out a very neat little kid shoe from beneath her dress and examining carefully the three little rosettes that ornamented the curve of her instep, "that Mrs. Heathermount asked us to dinner for to-night, and I thought that it might be less dull than staying at home; so, as she said we might leave it an open question, under the circumstances, I sent round, about an hour ago, to say we would come."

"I am sorry you did. I shall hate it," said Macleod, taking up a newspaper that lay beside him.

"Oh, very well; we needn't go. I'll send round again, and say you are so tired."

"No, no, don't do that, I don't want to look as if I couldn't stand a beating—we must go now."

And a few hours later, Mr. and Mrs. Macleod were shown into Mrs. Heathermount's drawing-room. As she came forward to receive them she took no notice of his defeat, but a particularly warm pressure of the hand and a certain air of sorrow which she lent to the smile with which she greeted him, as she said, "It is so kind of you to come" seemed to add "after your disappointment," as plainly as if she had said the words.

The Macleods were rather late. Already an uncomfortable group of four or five men had formed itself in front of the fireplace, and conversed gravely upon topics which the constant expectation that dinner would be announced deprived of all interest. On one side of the room a man bent over a lady seated on a particularly low chair, and, in spite of the distance which such

a position placed between them, contrived to impart to his remark that "the drive has been empty to-day" as much mystery as if he were making an assignation. Here two ladies, who had never seen each other before, and probably would never meet again, were pretending to take an engrossing interest in the fact that the eldest child of the one had had the measles last year, whereas the other one's family had hitherto escaped that disease. There a young man had been bold enough to sit down next to Mrs. Heathermount's daughter, but he took care to show by his constrained position that he was half afraid of his boldness. Mrs. Heathermount was walking from one guest to another, apologizing for the unusual length of the *mauvais quart d'heure*.

"You see," she said, "the elections make people so uncertain to-night, and I don't know whether Sir Algernon Atherley can be here." At this moment the expected guests were announced. The husband was a gray but sensual looking man of about fifty-five, with deeply lined features and a forbidding aspect, a tall upright figure, and an expression which one might expect on the face of a man who had just tasted something very bitter. His wife, on coming into the room, impressed one at once as being handsome, voluptuous looking, but, above all things, *grande dame*.

"A thousand pardons, my dear Mrs. Heathermount," said Sir Algernon, in a voice which was meant to be exceedingly gracious, "but you know how busy we public men are, just now"; and he pulled himself up with a certain satisfaction as the expression, "we public men," made some of the guests look round at him. The business of "we public men," in this instance, was rather chimerical, as the lateness of the Atherleys' arrival had really been caused by Lady Atherley finding out at a late hour that the trimming of her dress was not quite to her taste, and consequently it had had to be altered at the last moment. Mrs. Heathermount hastily told the gentlemen whom they were to take down, and she had not quite finished her somewhat puzzling task when a gorgeous footman in blue and gold livery with powdered hair, like some good fairy, changed the growing impatience into general satisfaction by the magic words, "Dinner is served, madam."

As Mrs. Heathermount had long been a widow, a cousin of hers, a General Pelham, who had seen a fair share of active service since he first faced the foe and won the commendation of his colonel in the Afghan War of 1840, led the way with Lady Boyndale, a fine-looking old lady of whom it had been said in some satirical journal of fifty years ago that she was the vanquisher of the hero of Waterloo—a remark which she accepted half as a compliment and half as an insult.

Count de Boisvillion followed with Lady Atherley, then, after some other guests, Major Powell with Mrs. Macleod, and the procession was concluded by Macleod and Miss Heathermount and Sir Algernon Atherley with the hostess. As the party defiled into the room and gradually found out its appointed order by the help of the little cardboard dishes bearing the guests' names, a smile of satisfaction passed over every countenance. Grace was hurriedly muttered, and then, amidst the rustling of silks, the crack, crack of the ladies' *corsages*, a mixture of sounds dominated by the high note of some fork or spoon being swept against a wine glass, the company sat down.

In the discreet and cosy half-light of the surrounding room the table shone out very brightly beneath the lustre of twenty wax-lights, supported by a handsome, though perhaps too massive, silver candelabrum, which represented a caravan being attacked by Arabs beneath a palm tree, a centre-piece which was supported at the distance of a few feet by two figures of Arab horsemen galloping furiously towards it, their bodies bent forward as if in the act of throwing their long spears, while in their left hands they held aloft smaller candelabra, with six lights each. Between each of these figures and the centre group were placed various dishes of silver and crystal containing the dessert—dishes so arranged that the sombre browns of the nuts, the lychees, and guava jelly were relieved by the brighter tints of the crimson American apples, the golden oranges, and the paler bananas, while the variegated tones of the candied fruits, bon-bons, and flowers seemed to blend the various hues of this mass of colour into one harmonious whole.

Round the table the thousand lights which sparkled from the quaintly-chiselled spoons and forks were reflected and multiplied in the pure uncut glasses, while between each two guests the light poured in blood-red stains through the ruby claret glasses on to the dazzling whiteness of the cloth, and the crimson fringes surrounding the white satin *menus*, which in the form of banners were suspended opposite each guest from a little gilt staff rising out of a small dish of natural flowers, completed the border of colour which bounded the broad white mass of the table cloth.

The perfume of the flowers and fruits, the scents used by the ladies, the rose-water which stood in the finger glasses on the dinner waggon, all mingled together in one delicious odour, not marred as yet by the soups which were just being handed round. Those parts of the room not immediately close to the table were cast into a comfortable shadow, except where some large silver cups and salvers lighted up the heavy carved-oak sideboard behind General Pelham and Lady Boyndale. For the first few minutes it seemed as though the conversation would be general, for Mr. Smithson, a stout red-faced man in a white waistcoat, who looked like a millionaire and who might almost claim to be one literally, announced to General Pelham in a rather loud tone that he considered that we were on the eve of entering upon a period of at least eight or ten years of peace and prosperity.

Mr. Smithson was known to be so exceedingly fortunate in every speculation into which he had entered during the last few years that he was looked upon with great veneration for his Midas-like qualities, and a certain vulgarity of manner was tolerated in him which would have been bitterly condemned and satirized in any less fortunate man. Such an announcement was accordingly listened to with eagerness.

"I suppose you hardly mean that, if the result of the General Election proves as unfortunate as it at present promises to be," said Sir Algernon Atherley, shaking his head.

"What the elections may turn out don't matter a

straw. A good time is coming, and come it will anyhow. That's my belief."

"Then I suppose," said Mr. Arbuthnot, a handsome but somewhat dissipated-looking young barrister, leaning across a pretty little woman with sparkling black eyes and plump cheeks, "that we shall have increased railway traffic soon?"

"Ha, ha," chuckled Smithson, "I see what you want, you want to get a tip out of me. Well, well, I'll give you one. I don't want to keep everything to myself; besides, the tip I can give you now is a big affair. There is room for everyone. If you ask me what to buy, I should say——"

All this time he had been emphasizing his words with his spoon, which he held out towards Mr. Arbuthnot, greatly to the annoyance of Mrs. Powell, the lady who sat between them, for she noticed that he had begun eating his soup, and she had no wish to see her delicate cream-coloured dress stained. Here the millionaire, who noticed that other people had finished their soup, took two or three spoonfuls very rapidly, while Mrs. Heathermount, feeling a little shocked at her guest, looked round the table, with a shrug of the shoulders, which seemed to say, "We must make the best of him."

"What I should recommend you to buy," continued Mr. Smithson, who had hurriedly finished his soup, "is whatever you fancy." There was a look of general disgust on everyone's face; to be vulgar was bad enough, but to make game of people in this way was insufferable. "What I mean," he continued, regardless of the general disappointment, "is that whatever you buy, from Consols to Turks, or mining shares, will turn out well, only, of course, you mustn't touch the hundreds of new companies which will be floated within the next few months."

The unrefined tone which the monied man had given to the conversation caused it to die out at once. Macleod looked at his two neighbours. Miss Heathermount, who sat on his left, was speaking to her uncle, General Pelham, next to whom she was seated.

Count de Boisvillon, a handsome man with black eyes, white teeth, and grey hair—a greyness scarcely

yet beginning to show itself in his moustache or eyebrows—had settled himself down to talk to Lady Atherley with that satisfied air which was the natural result of a certainty that he was about to enjoy a good dinner, and the probability that he would be well appreciated by a very charming woman. He had known her a couple of winters ago in Rome, and the great admiration which he had then shown for her had been very well received. In fact, when she had left Italy he imagined himself so thoroughly in her good graces that he was very nearly following her to England to complete his conquest, but other attractions had intervened, and so it happened that he had not seen her again till a week or two previously when he had come to London, and lost no time in availing himself of the invitation to call upon her which she had given him two years before.

Mrs. Heathermount, who had been calling at the same time, had asked him to join her party for the 8th.

Lady Atherley turned her head—for a moment her eyes met Macleod's. "What a grand woman," he thought. She liked something about him, and said, "I hear you have been defeated at Sandborough: I am so sorry."

One reason why Macleod had not liked going out to dinner that night was that he dreaded the condolences which he feared would be poured upon him. Hitherto, everyone had had the tact to refrain from alluding to his misfortune, and now a perfect stranger, a woman to whom he had not been even introduced, was the first to touch upon the subject. But there was something so sympathetic in the deep rich tones of her voice, that he felt no embarrassment at her remark. On the contrary, he felt thankful to her for her sympathy, though he presumed that the sympathy was given entirely to the cause which he represented, and not in any way to himself individually.

Lady Atherley was a woman who would have attracted attention in any room. There was no single feature in her face which could be called perfect in itself; and yet there was a certain indefinable charm about the face which made nine men out of ten fancy at first sight that she was a beauty. Her complexion

was rather too pale, and made a strong contrast to the rich, ruddy brown of her hair. Her lips, though not very full, were dewy and luscious; her teeth pearly and regular; her eyes, of a dark but cold gray, were fringed with long, dark lashes, which lent them a look of softness which they did not really possess. Her figure was tall, but not quite stately, for the fulness of the bust. Hers was an autumnal beauty, such as age sometimes gives to certain women whose face of thirty years old one would like to see again, a beauty which makes one think of the youth that they have never had.

The defeat of the Conservatives had come as a great blow to her. During the last two sessions Sir Algernon had made his name conspicuous in almost every important debate by the good service which he had rendered to the Ministry, and it was well understood among the influential members of the party that at the first opportunity a place would be found for him in the Cabinet. Such an opportunity would probably have occurred after the elections if Lord Beaconsfield had returned to power, and Sir Algernon had even been sounded as to whether he would accept a subordinate post *en attendant*. Being still a comparatively young man in the parliamentary sense, he had listened to the overtures which had been made to him, and his wife was already planning how she was to establish a salon which should rival that of the late Lady Waldegrave as soon as she should have the additional weight which her husband's seat in the Cabinet would give her.

But now that the Conservative majority was melting away like snow before a southerly wind, she felt that it might be years before her dream was realised, and no woman of thirty-two can bear to think of postponing for an indefinite time any plan in the success of which her own personal attractions are to count for a great deal. Macleod was right, then, in thinking that Lady Atherley's sympathy was meant for the Conservative cause—or rather, for the benefits which the success of that cause was to confer upon the country generally, and upon herself in particular. But some small portion of her sympathy was given to him for his own sake. She was a woman of rapid likes and dislikes. She had

noticed him as she came into the drawing-room, and singled him out as the nicest-looking man there; and when she had seen in the look he had just given her the undoubted admiration which he had been unable to conceal, she had felt attracted towards him at once.

"It is annoying, isn't it?" he answered, "and what is doubly vexing to me is the thought that possibly by some little extra exertion, I might have won three or four more votes if I had suspected that so small a number would have made the difference."

"But I heard that you showed the most extraordinary energy, and, indeed, considering the wave of Radicalism which seems suddenly to be sweeping over the country, I think you may consider that you really gained a victory."

The ice was broken between them, and the conversation flowed on freely until Macleod was surprised to find himself dilating on what he was to have done if he had got into Parliament, and a little later Lady Atherley was still more surprised to think that she was explaining to him all her ambitions about the political *salon*, a subject of which she had never yet spoken to anyone save her most intimate friends. The dinner was getting on, the second *entrée* was being handed round. De Boisvillon had tried in vain to find an opportunity of reminding Lady Atherley of their pleasant days at Rome, but she could not remember some incident which he mentioned to her, and while he paused for a moment to think of some circumstance which would recall it to her memory, she had turned away and plunged deeper than ever into the conversation with Macleod.

For a few minutes he had been deeply offended, and relapsed into silence, venting his pique upon the dishes which were handed to him, letting none pass him. Then he had tried to begin a conversation with Mrs. Macleod, but she was listening to a description of a wonderful run with the Pytchley from Major Powell, who, being as enthusiastic as herself about hunting, was treating her to all the tit-bits of his hunting reminiscences, and enjoying his dinner immensely, and therefore the Count had to turn once more to the dis-

cussion of the various good things which were put before him.

Miss Heathermount was enjoying the scene. She was not at all hurt at the neglect of her partner, for, like her mother, she loved the Conservative cause with all her heart, although neither of these ladies had any personal, or, rather, individual benefit to expect from it, and she thought that the objects of the cause might be much better furthered by a friendship springing up between the Atherleys and Mr. Macleod than by any conversation which she could hold with him.

Captain Ruffhed, a retired naval captain, was talking in rather a loud tone about the immense capital which some of the Liberals had been able to make out of the agitation against co-operative stores. "I'll tell you how my brother got over that question," he said; "a wine merchant had got up at one of his last meetings and asked him if he had ever dealt at the stores, and whether he would pledge himself never to deal there any more. 'Yes,' he answered, 'I have dealt there, and I won't pledge myself not to deal there again, for once a very tiresome old aunt of mine came to stay with me, and I couldn't get rid of her. She wouldn't go. It was no use giving her hints. But at last I thought of a plan. I bought half-a-dozen of golden sherry at the stores, and I wouldn't put any other wine on the table. She held out valiantly at first, and I began to despair, but the day I opened the fourth bottle she asked me if I had much more of that wine in my cellar. I told her there was about a pipe of it. She turned pale. The next day she left, and has not come back since. Under these circumstances I cannot pledge myself not to deal at the stores.' The wine merchant was satisfied." And Captain Ruffhed laughed with all his might at his brother's wit.

Mrs. Pelham, to whom he ostensibly addressed this story, though it was meant for the whole table, smiled faintly, but Lady Boyndale turned to Mr. Arbuthnot and said she thought it very bad taste for a man to make fun of any lady, and worse still of a relation, for the amusement of an election mob.

But now the conversation between Lady Atherley

and Macleod had fallen into more intimate topics. They were discussing the happiness or unhappiness of married life; their personal feelings on those and similar subjects. So interested had they become that several times a footman had been obliged to stand gravely beside them with some dish in his hand for several seconds before he could attract their attention sufficiently to induce them to say whether they would take some of it or not; and they had ceased to exercise any choice in the matter, but said "Yes" or "No" by chance, and of some dishes they had received they sent the viands away untasted. They were speaking in a low tone with their faces very close together; the other guests at the table scarcely existed for them any longer; they heard not a word of Captain Ruffhed's election anecdotes; only now and then, when the powdered hair and expressionless face of some footman came between them, did they realise for a moment that they were not alone.

Lady Atherley spoke once or twice of the heat of the room, and a slight flush suffused her face. Even the marble whiteness of her bosom, where it contrasted with the black lace of her dress and the two crimson roses nestling down upon it, had assumed a delicate tinge of pink. Macleod did not notice the heat. He felt warm with that comfortable warmth which comes of a good dinner and several glasses of excellent champagne, but the presence of Lady Atherley troubled his senses strangely. Her eyes looking so closely into his, her breath upon his cheek, the rich low tones of her voice falling so softly on his ear, the near proximity of her well-developed figure in the full bloom of maturing womanhood—all contributed to weave a kind of spell over him which made his breath come shorter and spread a delightful languor over his senses. The dessert was being handed round. Macleod saw that the moment was drawing near when the ladies would rise from the table. Mr. Smithson had cracked a number of nuts, and was taking them out of their shells. Mrs. Arbuthnot, who was in a condition of prospective motherhood, had turned very white, and kept her eyes anxiously on Mrs. Heathermount; while, at the other end of the table, Mr. Arbuthnot was holding a banana

in his right hand, while his left was under the table squeezing Mrs. Powell's fingers. General Pelham was dozing with his eyes half shut, while Lady Boyndale was telling him a long story about the late Duke of Wellington.

"I am so sorry to think the evening will be so soon over," said Macleod, "and perhaps we may not meet again. I wish I could ask you to call on us."

"Of course I will," said Lady Atherley, "I can speak to Mrs. Macleod upstairs and arrange it."

"No, you mustn't do that. Since I have asked you to call like this you must promise not to arrange it in this way, but to wait a few days and then call if you like. And now, to save you the trouble of asking Mrs. Heathermount about us, I will tell you who we are. We are poor—I mean really poor. We do not keep any carriage except a brougham, and I don't know how my election expenses are to be paid unless my partners will pay them for me and let me work the debt off. I am just admitted junior partner in the house of Thompson and Haroldson, and I am the first of my family for four generations who has followed any profession but the army. We have not many friends, but you would never meet anybody in our house whom you would be ashamed to see in your own. And now, if you think that is all right, and you don't happen to forget it, come and call in a week or two."

"What a strange boy you are," said Lady Atherley, "of course I shall come."

"I wish I were a boy," said Macleod, "but I am thirty-five, *bien sonné*."

"I think a man, like a woman, is of the age which he appears to be. So you may be twenty-five if you like."

"Thanks for saying so. And now, may I speak to you again when we come upstairs?"

"Why, of course."

Lady Atherley was not accustomed to be asked such a question, for the men who sat next to her at a dinner were almost always sure to come up and finish their conversation in the drawing-room. She liked the deference which the request implied.

Mrs. Heathermount had succeeded in catching Lady

Boyndale's eye, and much to the relief of Mrs. Arbuthnot, who was feeling very faint, the ladies rose and retired to the drawing-room. As soon as the door closed behind them, the gentlemen rose and stretched their legs, then settled themselves to the table again with that air of relief which men always seem to assume at such a moment, even when the ladies with whom they have been conversing are of the most agreeable.

General Pelham who had roused himself on the departure of the ladies, walked to the top of the table and sat down by Sir Algernon, with whom he commenced a conversation on the advisability of keeping garrisons permanently at Cabul and Candahar—a proposition which Major Powell (who had been a consistent Liberal all his life, though, he said, he couldn't stand Gladstone any longer) considered to be a most absurd and dangerous one.

Mr. Arbuthnot had drawn his chair a little closer to Mr. Smithson's, and was entertaining that gentleman and Captain Ruffhed with some of the details of a celebrated divorce case upon which he had been engaged as junior counsel—details which even the least modest of the weekly newspapers had been afraid to publish.

Count de Boisvillon was giving occasional aid to his neighbour, Major Powell, in the debate against General Pelham and Sir Algernon, while Macleod, who alone had not moved his chair, sat somewhat apart and sipped his claret gravely, as he thought over his charming new acquaintance. Gradually Major Powell and General Pelham had been getting more excited, and soon every one at the table was taking the side of one or the other. Count de Boisvillon, with his left elbow and forearm on the table, was ticking off the points of his argument with the forefinger of his right hand upon the palm of his left. He had just brought forward a strong reason for abandoning every part of Afghan territory, and was waiting for a reply, which neither Sir Algernon nor General Pelham seemed able to give.

Macleod here broke in with an argument which dispelled the Count's chief point in an instant. From that moment the debate was no longer doubtful; Sir

Algernon had now the one link which had been wanting in his chain of logic, and everyone at the table felt that Major Powell and his co-adjutors were worsted. General Pelham, satisfied with his victory, proposed to join the ladies.

As the gentlemen walked upstairs, Sir Algernon, who was always on the look-out for any one who might swell the talent of that side of the House which he hoped one day to lead, congratulated Macleod most graciously. "You were just in the nick of time," he said; "your argument was the very one wanted. I hope it may not be long before you may have an opportunity of coming to my assistance as efficaciously in another place."

In the drawing-room, Macleod was just moving towards Lady Atherley when General Pelham button-holed him, and began to pour into his unwilling ear a long description of the Afghan campaign of 1840. Count de Boisvillon thought this was a good opportunity to reproach Lady Atherley for her conduct towards him, but just as he began to speak to her, Mrs. Heathermount sailed up to him and carried him off to the piano, and Captain Ruffhed and Mr. Smithson, who both felt the influence of Lady Atherley's charms, hastened to take the vacant chairs on each side of her.

Mr. Arbuthnot, who had been getting on too fast with Mrs. Powell, now felt all the awkwardness of a flirtation which had grown up too rapidly, and he found himself in a position from which it was difficult to retire, and get beyond which he dared not advance, for he was able to see that Mrs. Powell was simply a flirt and nothing worse.

At last General Pelham gave Macleod a chance of escape, and he too joined the little court which Lady Atherley had by this time assembled around her, but only just in time to hear Mr. Smithson paying her a ponderous compliment which Captain Ruffhed tried to surpass, when she rose to say good-night, as her carriage had been announced some minutes before. Macleod offered his arm, and led her downstairs.

"Well, you did not come and speak to me in the drawing-room," she said, archly.

"You know I couldn't," and Macleod looked so vexed that she hastened to reassure him.

"I saw you couldn't, but if you have anything more to say to me I shall be at home to-morrow at five o'clock, at No. 55, Grosvenor Square."

"I can't come to-morrow; I am unfortunately engaged," said Macleod, "but the next day at the same hour."

"I don't know. I can't answer for myself then, but you may come on the chance of finding me."

By this time Macleod had placed a black satin cloak, embroidered in red and yellow silk and lined with sable, upon her shoulders, and as he did so he could not resist the temptation of letting his hands rest there for a moment, though he had not thought at dinner of venturing to touch her hand. As she disengaged herself gently from him she thought, "If my husband were only like that I could do without wealth and luxury." He handed her into her carriage, and as she drove off he stood for a moment bareheaded in the chill night air. "And this is the day of my defeat," he thought, "and yet I have not felt so happy for years. What strange beings we are!"

"Don't you think it was just as well we went to the Heathermount's," asked Mrs. Macleod as she lay down beside her husband that night. "I thought it awfully jolly. Major Powell was so nice. Did you enjoy it?"

"Immensely," said Macleod, and he blew out the light.

CHAPTER IV.

ELLA MACLEOD.

THE Macleods had married very early, at an age when most boys and girls are only dreaming of marriage as a vague probability of the future. In fact he had waited impatiently for his twenty-first birthday to get the knot tied, and she, a romantic girl of seven-

teen, had fallen in love with him and married him, as she would have fallen in love with and married any man of tolerable appearance and gentlemanlike manners, with whom she had happened to come in contact at that time.

For the first three or four years they had lived in a somewhat dingy paradise in Kensington Gate, thoroughly happy in each other's society, refusing all dances and almost all dinners, and seeing friends as little as possible. Before the first year of their marriage had passed a son had been born to them, and the young mother had found the care of him sufficient to occupy her time. How had this state of things changed? Neither of them could tell. Gradually they began to see a little more of society—they even went to dances—Ronald Macleod not caring to dance at first, but standing in everybody's way about doorways, taking dowagers down to supper, sometimes even, out of good-nature, taking some "impossible" wallflower for a turn. Happy all the time that his wife should be admired, and that she should enjoy dancing, he nevertheless used to get rather tired during the small hours of the morning. At first Ella Macleod was pleased with her husband. It seemed so kind of him to take her out when he cared so little for gaiety himself, and she used to tell him of the compliments which were paid her, for though she would as soon have thought of throwing her child out of the window as of flirting, she was young, married, and pretty—three qualities which brought her a good deal of attention, notwithstanding the pureness of her heart. But after a while it happened two or three times that men pointed out her husband to her with some such remark as "How melancholy that fellow looks," or "I wonder a man cares to come to a dance and stick up against the wall all night."

From that time his pale face, watching her about the room, became a reproach to her, and she begged him to try a dance with some nice girl, and see if he wouldn't like it. He danced, and he did like it. He happened to be introduced to a remarkably pretty girl, and a confirmed flirt. She did her best to make his evening pleasant, and she succeeded.

Ronald's nature was different from his wife's. She would have considered a kiss from any man's lips except her husband's as an infamy, but he—confident of his affection for her—soon came to look upon a caress bestowed upon some pretty girl as a harmless ingredient in an evening's amusement—a trifle which was not worth thinking about the next day. Ella saw with alarm the change in her husband, and once or twice when she had come into some conservatory or boudoir and found him bending affectionately over his partner, or pressing her hand, she had felt the blood flowing to her heart with a sickening rush, but her pride prevented her from saying a word to him, though sometimes she would lie awake for hours with the tears flowing silently down her cheeks, while the terrible thought forced itself upon her that all the love she had given him was despised and that he was unworthy of her. Perhaps a word of reproach or a scene of jealousy might have changed this state of things, and have put a stop to Ronald's flirtations for ever, but Ella was not the woman to speak that word or enact such a scene.

“No,” she thought, “if his love for me is not strong enough to keep him, he is not worth trying to keep by any other bonds.” But though she showed no signs of jealousy, her suffering soured her temper, and her husband was often astounded at the unreasonable manner in which she would pick a quarrel with him. To him it never occurred that she could mind any flirtations so harmless and open as those in which he indulged—especially when he used to tell her about them, without eliciting one word of blame from her. But at last he learnt, when too late, that he had sacrificed the chief happiness of his life-time for a few hours of frivolous amusement. One night a Captain Osmerton had danced a good many times with Ella.

The ball-room was growing warmer and warmer, for though the windows were all open, the sultry July air seemed too heavy to carry away the heat of the numerous gas lamps, and between the dances most of the guests strayed into the passages or sat on the stairs, and some few were venturesome enough to wander out into the garden. With some difficulty Captain Osmerton persuaded Ella to come out and look at the stars.

After the intense heat of the ball-room, the right air felt delicious, and she sauntered with her partner to a summer-house at the end of the garden.

"Let us sit down a moment," said Captain Omerston.

"Oh, no," she replied, "it looks black and horrid in there, and the air is so delicious out here."

"Well, I'll just look in and see what it is like," and he stepped into the summer-house.

A girl rushed out and ran across the lawn. In the moonlight Ella could see that her face was flushed, and that the border of artificial flowers round her head was torn and hanging down.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," muttered Captain Osmerton, retreating discreetly from the doorway to let a man pass out.

The man was Ronald Macleod.

Ella had been enjoying the evening thoroughly. She had a wonderful way of stopping men when they began to pay her compliments, and of making them feel that it was better to leave that kind of nonsense alone, without hurting their vanity. She was trying this process upon Captain Osmerton, when they came to the summer-house.

"You see, other people are not so nervous as you are," he said; "that girl does not seem to have been afraid of the dark."

Ella's cup of pleasure had suddenly been dashed from her lips. She felt slighted, wounded, almost desperate. As she thought of her husband sitting there with the girl who had run past her, a defiant feeling came over her—a wish to be revenged, a longing to do something that would break the ties between her and Ronald for ever, even at the cost of her life.

"I am not afraid, either," she said; "I will go in and sit down, I am tired," and they walked in.

As they sat there, she heard his voice, but she did not understand what he said. She did not attempt to answer him.

"Are you ill?" he asked, after a few minutes, putting his hand on her arm.

"No," she said, quietly.

He let his hand pass down her arm till he held her wrist, which he pressed firmly. She did not withdraw

it. For a moment both were silent. Then he suddenly released his hold upon her wrist and passed to the opposite side of the way. His heart beat quickly, and he thought with exultation of the conquest he had made. She sat unmoved. Her eyes were wide open in the darkness and fixed on vacancy, while he poured out a few rapid words of love; but her pulses beat no faster, and she scarcely understood the words he was uttering. She remained totally unresponsive to his wooing; and then bending down his head he pretended to sympathize with her for her husband's conduct.

"Fool!" she cried, starting to her feet, and with her clenched hand she struck out at him. All the jealousy, the anger which had been burning at her heart burst forth in that exclamation. "Take me back to the room," she said, in a voice overflowing with scorn, "and leave me at once. Remember that if ever we meet again we are strangers. If you disobey me, I shall tell our hostess and my husband of the insult you have put upon me."

Captain Osmerton was so astonished at this sudden alteration in her manner that he found nothing to say, but walked in silence towards the house. As they came within the light of the window she saw that a small stream of blood was trickling down his face. The sharp edge of an oriental bracelet which she wore had torn a large strip of skin from his forehead. She called his attention to it, and then bowing to him returned to the ball-room alone. She had felt no emotion when Captain Osmerton poured forth words of love, but she often thought of them afterwards. The spell of her purity had been broken. She could no longer say that her husband was the only man who had spoken of love to her. She had, like so many others, listened to the tempter's voice. From that day Ella felt that her love for Ronald was gone for ever.

Not many months later the Macleods were going to Inverness for the Northern Meeting—a gathering which they had never missed since their marriage. But on the very day that they were to start some urgent business in Ronald's office detained him, and Mrs. Macleod went on alone, so that she might have a day's rest after her journey before going to the Meeting balls.

But it so happened that Ronald was not able to follow her for a fortnight. Of course she went to the balls with the friends at whose house she was staying, and there she met a Mr. Fraser, who took a very great fancy to her and danced with her as often as she would allow him.

He was a very plain man, but there was a certain dare-devil look about him which greatly pleased her, and he had particularly mischievous twinkling eyes which gave him a charm, the greater to her mind from the contrast which they afforded to Ronald's habitually grave expression. Added to this, he was a man who impressed one with the idea that he would carry through anything he might undertake.

The night of the second ball he danced with her more than half the evening, and he seemed to have such a fascination for her that she began to believe she was in love with him; and when he said good night she cordially returned the pressure of his hand. During the next few days he managed to call every day at the house of the Reptons, with whom she was staying a few miles from Inverness, and she either rode or walked with him almost every time he came. He seemed to exercise a strange power over her. He had but to touch her arm, or put his hand on her waist, and she felt as if all will of her own had oozed out of her. He called her by her Christian name, and she had no power to forbid him. When she thought of her husband, it was with that hard frame of mind which had taken possession of her on the night of her adventure with Captain Osmerton, and she felt a certain satisfaction in the thought, that she was only doing to Ronald what he had done to her.

One day, just before Ronald's arrival, Harry Fraser proposed to take Mrs. Repton and Ella for a row on the Beaully Firth. It was a fine afternoon, and the ladies thought an excursion in a boat would be a pleasant change. For an hour or so Fraser rowed steadily out to sea, but after that time he shipped the oars, and Ella recited one of Aytoun's spirit-stirring "Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers," while he lay in the bottom of the boat, and Mrs. Repton paddled in the water with her hands. A sudden breeze sprang up, and

before Fraser thought of turning back to shore the sea was getting quite rough. Mrs. Repton was a little frightened, but Ella loved to watch the waves rolling towards them and dashing the spray in their faces. Soon Fraser found that the wind and tide were too strong for him, and that it would be impossible to row back that night.

"There is no help for it," he said, "we must just make for the shore at any point we can reach, and trust to finding our way back by land."

But though Fraser toiled manfully, and though the ladies sometimes took the oars to give him a rest, night had fallen before they reached the shore. Soon after landing they met a fisherman, who told them they were only about a mile from Nairn; therefore, leaving the boat in his care, they walked on to see if they could get a train back to Inverness. But the last train was gone, so they sent a telegram to Mrs. Repton's house saying that they were safe, and then took rooms for the night at the Marine Hotel.

There a good dinner and a bottle of champagne restored their good humour, which had been a little tried by their long exposure to the wind and weather, and they talked over their misadventure as a good piece of fun. The two ladies had a bedroom opening out of the room in which they had dined, and Mrs. Repton soon felt tired, and got up to go to bed. Ella was lying on the sofa, while Fraser was leaning back in an armchair beside her, enjoying a cigarette which the ladies had given him permission to light. Ella felt very comfortable, and not at all inclined to break up the evening so soon.

"Do stop till Mr. Fraser has finished his cigarette," she pleaded.

But Mrs. Repton, who was very delicate and felt utterly exhausted, was inexorable.

"You stop a little longer, if you like," she said; "but I must go now."

For some minutes after she had left the room Fraser kept his eyes fixed on Mrs. Macleod, while he puffed away at his cigarette in silence. There was a strange light in his eyes which caused her a vague sensation of uneasiness. Suddenly he threw his cigarette into the fireplace.

... "My darling Ella," he murmured, "are you angry? Do you hate me?"

Her lips moved, and he seemed to feel rather than to hear the word "No."

Strange to say, that man exerted a peculiar fascination over her at that time. To her he seemed young, intelligent, serious, deep, armed for the victories of life, with all the cold and calculating qualities which she, before her marriage, had dreamed of finding in a husband. At the outset Fraser seized the situation and foresaw his chances. He began to make love to her; and this woman, with a husband, with one of the best positions in London, listened to him as if spell-bound. It was one of those passions which, strange to say, at times take hold of women of her age and seem to pass, as it were, into their very blood. Fraser, meanwhile, exerted all his genius in the endeavour to attach her to himself, and to make her blind to her fault. Nothing betrayed him, nothing escaped him which could, for one moment, have shown her that there was in him that spice of contempt, that sort of disgust which a man feels for certain ridiculous situations in which a woman who loves places herself.

Mademoiselle de Maupin once found that a fold in a certain sheet turned the course of her life for several years. Ella Macleod owed her name of "honest woman" to an object scarcely less trivial. At this moment Mrs. Repton, who had been lying for some little while on her bed, noticed a mouse running across the floor, and as she, in common with a great many of her sex, had a particular horror of these little creatures, she sprang to the door, shrieking out loudly, "Ella! Ella!" With one bound Fraser stood at a distance from the sofa, and Mrs. Macleod sprang to her feet. Without saying good-night, she hurried past Fraser into the bedroom.

Many hours passed before she got to sleep that night, and as she lay awake, listening to the never-ceasing plashing of the waves upon the shore, she realised the full depth of the danger upon the brink of which she had been standing when Mrs. Repton's cry had drawn her back. Ella was not a woman to have gone back to her husband with a smiling face and a tolerably

comfortable conscience if she had not been saved by that opportune call. Hers was a nature to which the fearful comedy of continual deceit would have been unbearable, and she would have fled from her husband for ever, rather than have to play so uncongenial a part. The thoughts that passed through her mind that night seemed to weave a sort of invisible armour around her.

She did not treat Fraser any differently; she even let him kiss her again, for a sort of false shame, joined with her liking for him, prevented her from altering her manner towards him. Though she had been surprised into a momentary weakness, hers was not a passionate nature, and the crisis which had almost led to such grave consequences, had been as unforeseen by Fraser as it had by her.

CHAPTER V.

MORS AMORIS.

Two days later, Ronald came north to Inverness. That night she told him all. She had meant to let him enjoy his holiday, before grieving him with an account of her fault; but he had taken her in his arms so tenderly, and seemed so glad to see her again, that she felt it was mean of her to let him think too highly of her, and her resolve had melted away.

Before all things in the world, Ronald believed in the absolute purity of his wife. If anyone but herself had told him what had happened he would have thought his informant was a liar or a lunatic, and even when she spoke, it was long before he could think she meant anything but a hideous jest. When Ella saw his incredulity it cut her to the heart. Then she enlarged upon her story, dwelling upon the details to punish herself and taking all the blame on herself. But when her confession was ended he took her in his arms and

kissing her tears away he forgave her, thanking God that she had fallen in spirit only and not actually in very deed.

But often during the night, as he thought again and again of the scene she had described to him, he would ask, "Are you awake?" and when he found that she was so he would question her as to some detail, and then turn round with a heavy heart to brood upon his sorrow till the morning. Ella felt deeply touched by his kindness to her, and if the love she had once borne him had not been quite dead, her pity for him would have re-awakened it.

But though she hated to see his sufferings, she never looked upon him as anything more to her than a very kind friend, and when by word or look he showed that his love for her was still as strong as ever, she received his caresses with indifference—often even with impatience. But unrequited affection does not last long. Ronald's was not a generous nature. Though he had forgiven his wife, he never could quite forgive her the fact that he had forgiven her, and sometimes, by some hint, he could not avoid showing her that her fault was not forgotten. Then, too, his faith in her was gone. Every man who now paid her attention was a source of new anxiety to him.

For two years his love was dying daily, and the death-struggle was fierce and terrible. Sometimes he would be harsh and vindictive to her, at others he would overwhelm her with kindness. One day he would tell her he wished he might never see her again, and another he would feel that if she left him life could hold out no hope for him. And with his faith in her died his faith in an after life. Like many men who are miserable in this world, he turned for consolation to the pictures of the next, which religion draws for the weary and heavy laden; but the more he brooded over the subject the weaker his faith became, until having retreated from one stronghold of Christianity to another, he at length abandoned all belief in a future state.

The anguish of spirit which he had suffered during these two years almost broke his heart, and rooted out from it all love for his wife, leaving the ground

clear for that mutual friendship which now grew up between them. Once, as a last resource, he had tried taking her for a month's tour in Brittany—at a time of year when the English tourist is a *rara avis in terris*—hoping that the community of thought which their ardent love of scenery would awaken might once more bring their hearts together. But a young Barrister, a Mr. Fausterley, who was travelling for his health, happened to meet them at a *table d'hôte* almost at the beginning of their journey, and feeling very lonely by himself he arranged his route so as to suit theirs, and contrived that they should seldom go anywhere without him.

At first Ronald chafed a good deal at this infliction, but Fausterley was light-hearted and amusing, and both the Macleods conceived a great regard for him, and an intimacy sprang up between the two men which soon ripened into friendship, so that Ronald consoled himself with the idea that though his tour had failed to regain for him his wife's affection—a result which he had always regarded as extremely problematical—still it had brought him a friend.

After the Macleods returned to town, their new friend, who came home a few months later, was made welcome at their house in St. George's Square—so welcome that, before long, he used to go to dine with them, *sans façon*, whenever he and they had no engagement; and a week seldom passed without his devoting at least one evening to them.

Charlie Fausterley had always looked upon marriage as one of the greatest mistakes which two human beings could make, but when he became acquainted with what seemed to him the sensible views which the Macleods held on the subject, he modified his opinions, and began to think that there might after all be some advantages in the wedded state. To him it appeared that his new friends were always kind and courteous to each other, while at the same time neither attempted to curtail the liberty of the other in any way, nor did they surfeit each other with demonstrations of affection or exhibitions of jealousy.

On the other hand, the Macleods were equally well-pleased with him. He was always ready to do any-

thing for them. Whatever occupied the attention of either of them became instantly an object of interest to him, and he soon became the confidant of both upon all subjects except those relating to the attitude which they had assumed towards each other.

To Mrs. Macleod this intimacy was an especial advantage. Her husband being occupied all day, Fausterley—who was as yet almost briefless, and had plenty of time at his disposal—was able to take her out shopping or driving when, had she depended upon Ronald, she must either have gone alone or stayed at home. For some time this intimacy was perfectly Platonic, but gradually Fausterley, who was convinced that Ronald looked upon his wife merely as a friend, managed to introduce into the relations which existed between himself and Mrs. Macleod a certain degree of tenderness.

Although in the beginning Ella rather discouraged this change in his manner, she soon came to look upon it as rather pleasant than otherwise, and she accordingly accepted it as in some way filling up the void in her heart which the fading away of her love for her husband had left there. Her adventure with Mr. Fraser at Nairn made her feel that there was no danger about this new *liaison*. The lesson which that hairbreadth escape had taught her was never likely to be forgotten. From that moment passion would never surprise her again. She might fall into sin; who is absolutely proof against every temptation of the world, the flesh, and the devil? but if she did so it would be deliberately, and not in an unguarded moment. So thoroughly had she realized all that she had been saved from when Mrs. Repton called her, that no unforeseen event could ever again throw her into the same danger.

Ronald Macleod was long in noticing this alteration in the relations between his wife and Fausterley. His friend's face was peculiarly open and frank-looking, and he was accustomed to speak to him so openly and freely upon the most secret feelings of his own heart that many suspicious circumstances passed quite unnoticed by him. Besides, he himself was so utterly incapable of betraying any friend who had

placed an equal amount of confidence in him that it seemed to him as unlikely that any undue affection should spring up between his wife and Fausterley as that she should fall in love with a brother.

One summer night, however, he happened to come into the drawing-room where they were sitting, without attracting their attention, and he overheard a few words which could scarcely be interpreted quite innocently; nor did the alacrity with which Fausterley sprang to his feet, or the expression of confusion which he and Ella wore, tend to reassure him. The blood rushed violently back to his heart, but the suffering he had undergone in the last few years had given him sufficient mastery over himself to enable him to conceal his emotion, and neither Ella nor Fausterley could be certain whether he had heard anything or not.

By an almost superhuman effort he contrived to let a month pass without either changing his manner to them or even letting himself attempt to find out what degree of intimacy existed between them. After that he judged that the security which his great trust in them had established in their minds would be completely restored. Then he watched them. Every word they said in his hearing, whether meant for his ear or not, was weighed, every glance that passed between them was reasoned upon with a calmness which often astonished Ronald himself.

Gradually he understood the situation until at last he knew their feelings almost better than they did themselves. There was a flavour of romance about their intimacy which made life pleasanter to both of them. Ella was perfectly safe. It was true she sometimes spoke a little more tenderly, or pressed Fausterley's hand with more warmth, than was actually right, but she was determined to do her duty by her husband, whom she believed to be true to her, though she still remembered the flirtations in which he had formerly indulged.

Fausterley on his side looked upon her with the deepest respect and affection. He really believed that had she been unmarried he could have found it in his heart to make her his wife, but, at the same time, he was glad that it was not necessary to analyze his

feelings on that point. When he told her of his love for her she listened to him so long as he spoke only of what might have been had she been unmarried, but if he ever attempted in any way to go further and to speak of hopes in the future, her manner would change at once, and a single gesture from her would suffice to change the current of the conversation.

Had Ella's been a more passionate nature this intercourse would have been dangerous. As it was, if Fausterley sometimes thought for a moment of dragging Ella from the pedestal upon which his admiration and respect had placed her, the manner in which she inveighed, with all the force of her cold nature, against those women who sacrifice honour, fame, self-respect, home, and family to one of the lowest passions of humanity, while they are yet ignoble enough to cling to the outward semblance of the virtue they have lost, would bring him in a moment to a purer state of mind, and he would curse himself as a brute, for daring to think of bringing shame upon friends to whom he owed so many happy hours.

Satisfied with the result of his investigation, Ronald forgave what he could not like in Fausterley, and made him his most intimate friend, confident that that was the surest way of rooting out anything which he did not approve of in the intimacy which existed between Ella and him.

As time went on this sort of three-cornered friendship grew stronger.

Soon Ronald held no secrets from his friend, but spoke to him without reserve upon any subject which happened to be in his mind at the moment. Fausterley, who had always supposed that the comparative indifference which existed between the Macleods was due to some fancy which Ronald had conceived for another woman, was surprised to find that there were really no grounds for such a belief; nor did it seem possible that such a state of things could exist, for he soon found that Ronald spoke to him with extraordinary frankness—even mentioning the suspicion with which he had once looked on Fausterley's attitude towards his wife.

Ronald had spoken thus plainly for two reasons; firstly, because he thought that friends should have no

secrets from each other ; and, secondly, because he was anxious to show that any suspicion which had once existed was now entirely removed.

But his motives were thoroughly misunderstood. Fausterley imagined that this conversation was meant as a warning to him, and he conceived the idea that Ronald regarded him with distrust.

From that day he determined that he would let his intimacy with Ella be less noticeable. This idea he also impressed upon Ella, and they agreed that although they would never conceal from Ronald any meeting which might occur between them, still they would not mention it unnecessarily. Thus it happened that the course which Ronald had pursued with the idea of loyally making everything frank and open between himself and his friend was the cause of a number of reticences on the part of Fausterley—a species of passive deception which gradually undermined his own loyalty, and led him and Ella to look upon Ronald as a kind of enemy against whom their common safety obliged them to combine.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST VISIT.

WHEN Ronald returned to his office the morning after Mrs. Heathermount's dinner, he found that his colleagues were not so careful of his feelings as the guests of the previous evening had been. Some of the clerks chaffed him, others were sorry that the "House" should have missed being represented in Parliament—others again were envious. The mere fact that he should have become a partner was intolerable to them, and when he had gone down to Sandborough to contest the borough they had declared that the whole thing was a farce. "What is Parliament coming to," they asked, "if a fellow like Macleod can even be put in

nomination for a seat? Of course he won't have a ghost of a chance, but, hang it all, we shall soon have a House of Commons like the American Senate, and all decent people will leave politics to the dregs of the people." To men like these the news of Ronald's defeat was like a shower of rain to the parched pastures of July, and they took care, by many cutting remarks, to show their satisfaction. But what astonished everybody, was the singular equanimity with which he bore his reverse. It was well-known that he was ambitious, and now his hopes were overthrown. His pecuniary position was known to every clerk in the house. His capital in the business was already far smaller than what his senior partners might reasonably have expected him to put into it, and consequently he could not withdraw even a thousand pounds from it, and that sum would, in all probability, be scarcely more than sufficient to cover his expenses. And yet, with all this, it was patent to everybody, that Ronald could not have been more cheerful if he had gained a victory, and had his expenses paid for him.

When business hours were over Ronald jumped into a cab and drove to the Temple, where he was just in time to catch Fausterley, and they walked into the Gaiety bar to have a glass of sherry.

"What has happened to you?" asked Fausterley. "I never saw you look like this before. Have they found out some mistake in the election? or have you just inherited a fortune?"

"Neither one nor the other, but I went to an awfully jolly dinner last night, and met such a woman," and then Ronald gave his friend an account of the dinner party, or rather of what he had seen of it, which was very little, coming back every now and again to some remark Lady Atherley had made, and dwelling upon her beauty, exaggerating her wit; trying, in fact, to describe her not as she really was, but as he saw her by the light of his newly-born passion.

Meanwhile the barmaid, who had expected when they came in to get some chaff or some broad compliments from them, stood by with a look of disdain on her face, picking up grains of salt on the tip of her forefinger and putting them on the point of her tongue,

very much bored at Ronald's interminable description, and equally disgusted with their neighbours—two bookmakers—who were too busy discussing a bottle of champagne and the merits of a "real good thing" for some race, to notice her.

Fausterley was delighted to hear of his friend's infatuation. He had always felt that the correctness of Ronald's life was rather a reproach to him for his own somewhat dissipated habits.

"Of course you are going to call on her to-day," he said, "where does she live; and what is her name?"

"Oh, never mind about that now. I can't go and call to-day, because I said I wouldn't. You see I knew I must arrange about my election expenses, and I did not know how long my partners might want to keep me."

"And is that settled?"

"Oh, yes. They have been awfully nice about it. They have allowed me to draw in advance upon my share of the profits for the year, and I am to take as little as I can possibly manage at the next two or three divisions until it is wiped off."

"But why don't you go and call now?—it is only a quarter to six, and I am sure from what you tell me she will be glad to see you; besides, you know, 'strike while the iron is hot.'"

"I see I am wrong in speaking to you, about this, Charlie, you can't imagine a fellow liking a woman without immediately putting some coarse construction upon it."

"Forgive me, old chap," said Fausterley, changing his tone. "I don't mean anything, but I can't help chaffing. I didn't think you were serious. But you know you really ought to go to-night. She would like it. It would look as if you were in earnest, and then you know women are so funny—an impression so soon wears off with them, it really is unwise to let her have another twenty-four hours to forget you in."

"I feel you are right," said Ronald, "but I can't go; and remember, if she does see me to-morrow and receives me nicely, these twenty-four hours will then count for me."

"Well—good-bye, I must be off now," said Faus-

terley; "I wish you good luck for to-morrow, and don't be angry at my chaff; I'll try and be more respectful in the future."

Ronald walked slowly down the Strand. How he wished that he had not said he was engaged. He might have known that his partners would not keep him very long, and then, instead of wandering alone in the streets, he might have been with her at that very moment; and now, suppose Fausterley was right, and that she should not receive him, or else that she received him very coldly; and he pictured himself going to the door and sending up his card, and then, after a pause, the footman coming down with the message that "her ladyship is not at home." Or then, again, he fancied himself walking up the staircase, and finding half-a-dozen tiresome old frumps calling. "But I'll sit them out if I have to stay all night," he thought.

The hurry and hustle of the Strand annoyed him. He turned down Bedford Street, and Garrick Street, and still his mind was busy guessing what his first visit would be like. Perhaps he would come into the room and find her alone. How eagerly he would rush forward to seize her hand. But then if she were to be very cold, and talk of nothing but politics, for instance.

How very probable it seemed that that intimacy which had sprung up so rapidly under the artificial light and heat of Mrs. Heathermount's dinner-table, should wither and die when exposed to the cold air of a formal call. Decidedly it was pleasanter to think of the past than to dream of the immediate future. In his memories of the past evening Ronald had not one disagreeable incident to recall. But where was he going? He had turned northwards out of Coventry Street and was now in that network of little streets which lie south of Oxford Street. Why he came there he could not think. However, as he could not be far from Grosvenor Square he thought he would just walk through it. It was ridiculous, of course, but what of that? He passed by No. 55. It was a substantial-looking house, but still, to him, there was something forbidding in its aspect. It seemed to frown at him. No light in the drawing-room window; only the flashing of the firelight. "Most

likely she is out," he thought. "How lucky I didn't call; but perhaps she will come in soon, it is getting rather late. I will walk up and down and see her go in. No. Hang it all, this is too idiotic," and hailing a passing hansom he drove home.

The next day Macleod got through his work with wonderful rapidity. By three o'clock he was ready to leave, but for another half hour he continued to write letters, for which there was no necessity. He felt too nervous to be idle, and he hardly dared think about the visit he was so soon to pay. Shortly after half-past three he was driving to Grosvenor Square. Several times his thoughts carried him far away—why, he could not tell, but it was not of Lady Atherley that he thought chiefly. Things which he had long forgotten engrossed his attention to such an extent that he forgot where he was. Then, suddenly would come the consciousness that he was driving through the streets, and that he had been doing so for hours, or was it days? What, only Regent Street, impossible! and then his thoughts would fly to some other subject. But at last the cab stopped—what a long time the footman took in answering his knock—"Is Lady Atherley at home?" His heart was beating so violently that he was afraid the footman would hear it.

"Yes, sir."

It was all right, then; Ronald wished he had some excuse for giving that footman half a sovereign. The footman would have taken the money without one. When Ronald was shown into the drawing-room there was no one in it. It was a large room with the darkest green Wilton carpet relieved by sprays of artistically arranged flowers, which were so cleverly designed that they seemed almost to lie upon the carpet instead of being a part of it. The furniture of ebony, with the slightest possible touch of gilding, was covered in crimson plush. The heavy curtains of the same material were trimmed with point lace, which matched the antimacassars lying upon the arm-chairs. An ebony grand piano by Broadwood with a piece of music open upon it stood between two fire-places, the mantel-pieces of which were supported by mermaids sculptured in the purest marble. The tails of these mermaids were continued for a short

distance along the edge of marble fenders. A pair of Abbotsford stoves, in one of which a small fire was burning, rested upon hearths of white tiles on which marine monsters were designed in dark green, while the tiles surrounding the stoves contained figures of Neptune on each side, and at the top the rising of Venus from the waves. The walls were papered in grey-green, with a few points of gilding upon the pomegranates, which formed the chief pattern of the paper. A painted dado of dark green, rising to a height of about 3ft. 6in., was lighted up by a profusely gilded pattern, and a border of gilding about eight inches wide, with mythological figures painted upon it, ran round the room against the ceiling. Between the three windows at one end of the room, were placed two little tables covered with old china. A large portion of the wall, opposite the fire-places, was occupied by an enormous mirror in an ebony and gold frame, reaching from a luxurious ottoman up to the ceiling. Above the fire-places were two large mirrors of Venetian glass, and the ornaments upon the mantel-pieces consisted entirely of *chefs d'œuvre* from Salviati's. A few water-colours by Tenkate, Bonnington, and Stanfield ornamented the walls, while ebony and gold brackets and *étagères* covered with Dresden figures and Capo da Monti cups and saucers filled up the odd corners. At the end of the room farthest from the windows stood a large ebony cabinet ornamented with *pietra dura* and chiselled brass, containing priceless gems of ceramic art by the great masters of Sèvres, Berlin, Vienna, and Arras, and also some crystal and enamelled goblets set with precious stones,—chief among them a tassa of lapis lazuli set in gold with rubies, and sapphires, and diamonds, supposed to have been shaped by the hand of Benvenuto Cellini himself.

Behind this cabinet opened two glass doors giving access to a conservatory containing a replica of Canova's Cupid and Psyche, surrounded by a great variety of ferns, orchids, and other exotic plants. Across an angle of this conservatory was swung a silken hammock at the height of little more than two feet from the floor. Over the ceiling of the drawing-room had been stretched a canvas upon which a rising

French artist had painted a large group of nymphs and cupids upon a background of blue sky and white clouds, the figures being copied from various pictures by Boucher.

Ronald placed his hat and cane upon the floor beside an armchair, and after standing up for a minute or two in expectation that Lady Atherley would come in, he sat down.

He was very fond of works of art and books, but he did not examine any of the various treasures around him, nor did he even read the titles of any of the books lying upon the table. One miniature which was standing open upon the table he took up for a moment, but the features bore no resemblance to those of Lady Atherley, and he put it down forgetting straightway whether it had been a portrait of a man or a woman. Lady Atherley seemed to be a long time coming, but Ronald cared not. She might keep him waiting for half-an-hour if she chose, for he was certain he should see her now.

He could not understand how it was that a woman whom he had only seen once could be so much to him; but he did not realise that although he had only seen her once in the flesh, he had been seeing her and conversing with her in imagination almost every minute of the day since he had met her, so that his love for her had grown far beyond the stage it had reached when he said "Good night" to her outside Mrs. Heathermount's door, two nights before.

At last the door opened. Ronald had heard no foot-step on the thick stair-carpet, and he started to his feet as Lady Atherley entered the room.

She wore one of those blue cotton dresses with white spots, which had not yet become common, but which a few months later were seen by dozens at every seaside place. Ronald advanced rapidly to meet her, and pressed her proffered hand warmly.

"How good of you to come," she said.

"And how can I thank you for your kindness in staying in to see me?" asked Ronald, with a deprecating gesture.

"How do you know that I stayed in with that object?"

"I don't know whether you did or not, and that matters little now, since I have the happiness of finding you," he answered.

"Well, do you know I had a good mind to punish you for not coming yesterday, by saying I was not at home, but I felt very dull, so I thought I would see you."

"If you wished to punish me, your wish has been granted, for I have been punished already—you little know—I little knew when I told you I was engaged what it would cost me to wait till to-day."

Lady Atherley walked to the ottoman in front of the large mirror and sat down. Ronald seated himself beside her. For a moment their eyes met. "I am so happy," said Ronald, forgetting all etiquette, and taking her hand in his, and drawing her towards him he pressed a kiss upon her cheek. Lady Atherley, a little startled at his behaviour, drew her hand back gently, and, without taking any notice of what he had done, asked him to ring for tea.

"No," said Ronald; "please don't bother about tea now. I don't know who may be coming in to call upon you at any moment, and now that I am here do let me see you and talk to you for a little while. You don't understand what happiness it is to me just to look at you again. I have been so anxious about this visit, I kept picturing to myself that I might not see you, or that people would be here, and now I have you alone I must tell you that I love you. Yes, Constance, I am mad to tell you this, I know, but it is such a pleasant madness, and I think it is better than the sanity of all the wise men in the world. I don't ask you to love me. I am willing to leave myself out of the question if you will only let me see you sometimes and let me worship you. Only let me call now and again, that is all I ask. I know it is wrong to speak to you like this, but I am so happy," and, throwing his arms round her, he kissed her again just below the ear. For a moment Lady Atherley strove to get free, but he held her firmly. Her first sensation had been one of surprise. Then for an instant she thought of ringing for assistance, but as he poured out his words with a deep, joyous earnestness, which reached her heart in spite of herself,

her will gave way, and when he held her in his arms with his lips pressed against her neck her indignation vanished.

"How did you learn my name?" was all she said.

"From the 'Peerage,'" he answered. "I have turned to Atherley in every available book of the kind. Those pages were the only words of you which I could get anywhere, for I dared not trust myself to call on the Heathermounts, for fear of saying too much, or letting them guess how deep an impression you have made upon me."

"Then I suppose you were satisfied with what you found there, since you have come to call?"

"If there is any satire intended in that remark I do not heed it," said Ronald, taking Lady Atherley's hand once more in his, and looking straight into her eyes; "it may seem strange to you that I should so suddenly have conceived this passion for you. To me it is incomprehensible, because for years I have given up all idea of anything of the kind, and until yesterday I should have treated the idea of my ever loving again as altogether preposterous, but however odd you may think it, I believe firmly that your woman's wit must teach you that this love is real and heartfelt, and that whether you bore the highest rank in the land or the humblest my love would be equally strong and genuine."

Lady Atherley shook her head sadly. "No," she said, "you are like the rest; many men have paid me attention; why, I know not; but for some reason or other, men always seem attracted to me. It sounds conceited perhaps to say so, but it is the case. At balls, at dinners, wherever I go I get compliments which sicken me; admiration which palls upon me, but love—no, never."

"Yes," answered Ronald, "I saw for myself how the men came round you after dinner at the Heathermount's, and I understand how it must always be so; for there is something about you so feminine, so womanly, so unlike us and yet so exactly what is wanted to complete us, that almost all men must feel drawn towards you. That ninety-nine out of a hundred of the men who are so attracted think only of the pleasure of

being with you at the moment, and do not receive any very deep impression—although at the time they may be tempted to think they have—I will readily believe; but because most men are in this sense little better than puppets, don't think that we are all so. I am so convinced that I love you—that I am not a puppet to you, but a real man with a real heart of flesh and blood—that your doubting my love gives me not the smallest uneasiness, for I know that truth which is so deep and so earnest must prevail and obtain credence, however strange or improbable it may appear at first sight."

"You may be right in what you say," answered Lady Atherley, "but I cannot believe you. Perhaps I would not if I could. And yet you seem to me to be something different to other men," she continued, looking at the carpet and talking almost to herself, while she left her hand unconsciously in Ronald's. "The other night, at the Heathermount's, I noticed you when we came into the room, and I thought I should like to be introduced to you; and then, when you sat next me at dinner, I felt I must say something sympathetic to you, for I had heard your name, and knew of your defeat. At first, I half feared you would be like so many other men, who just pay us silly compliments and talk nonsense; but, as the evening wore on, and you talked of unusual subjects, and evidently never once thought of saying anything complimentary to me, I saw you were not quite like everybody else, and I hoped we should meet again; indeed, I felt yesterday afternoon that you were coming, notwithstanding your having said you could not, and so strong was the idea in my mind that, although we were going to the theatre, I did not go up to dress till the last moment."

"And did you really think about me late yesterday afternoon?" asked Ronald, delighted. "Well, you will think it awfully foolish of me, but I actually came to the house about half-past six, and I should have walked up and down in front of it, on the chance of catching a glimpse of you, if I had not felt that it was too childish."

"How very strange. I felt you were near me. Do you believe in magnetism and spiritualism, and that sort of thing?"

"In magnetism, yes. In spiritualism I can't say, for I made many attempts to investigate it, and wasted many hours at *séances*, without arriving at any satisfactory result, though I must say I consider the balance of the evidence I collected to be decidedly against the theory that it is all imposture."

"Oh, do you know," said Lady Atherley, "I have been wishing for years to see a *séance*, and I don't know anyone who holds them."

"And yet it is the easiest thing imaginable to go to one. Will you let me arrange one for you?"

"Oh, that would be delightful; but when?"

"To-night, if you like; that is, if you don't mind going to a paid medium. In fact, if you are going merely out of curiosity, a professional medium will do as well as an amateur, and it is more likely that manifestations will occur."

"But are you in earnest? Do you really mean to-night?"

"Yes, of course I do. To-night or any night, but to-night by preference, because one of the best mediums holds a *séance* to-night, and besides, I should see something more of you."

Lady Atherley was charmed with the idea. After a moment's consideration, she said:

"I think I might manage it. My husband is going to dine at Richmond, and he will not be back till about eleven. I am to dine with my sister, and I will leave her early and then we can go."

"But that will never do. You should be at the *séance* by eight o'clock," objected Ronald. "If you can put off your sister, why not dine at home or somewhere with me at seven, and we could have dinner over before eight and go on to the *séance* in time."

"It is rather awkward, you see. My cook has a holiday, and I don't like to dine anywhere with you. It would look bad if anyone met us. I hardly could do that."

"But we could go to some quiet place and have a private room," urged Ronald.

"Impossible."

"Well, let us arrange for another day."

But Lady Atherley was quite excited over the idea of going to this *séance*.

"It is very foolish," she said, "but it would be such fun; yes, I will go. When and where shall I meet you?"

"At Charing Cross large waiting-room at a quarter to seven, if that will suit you."

"Very well, it is almost five now. I must send a note round to my sister at once to tell her I will not be with her to dinner."

"Till seven, then, good-bye," said Ronald, and he pressed his lips upon her hand—fearful lest if he kissed her face again she might be alarmed and refuse to come.

CHAPTER VII.

AT CHARING CROSS.

As soon as the door closed behind him Ronald hurried away towards home, but suddenly the thought occurred to him that it would be difficult to make an excuse for going out again immediately if he went into the house, so he hailed a cab, and, driving back to the City, sent a telegram to his wife saying that he was detained, and would dine at some restaurant. At half-past six he was at Charing Cross Station. He heard the bell at Westminster, but though he was a quarter of an hour early he fancied that Lady Atherley's watch might be a little fast, or that she might have miscalculated the time it would take to drive from Grosvenor Square, and that she might be already there. So he ran across the open space in front of the station, as if he were trying to catch a train, and, just stopping for a second outside the waiting-room door, to feel if his tie was all right and to smooth his moustache with his fingers, he walked in.

Casting a rapid glance around, he did not see Lady Atherley, and then he walked slowly across the room, examining every person in it. But she was not there, and Ronald was glad to think that he would

be there to receive her when she came. "A quarter of an hour to wait," thought he, looking at the clock, and he walked out to get a paper, and then came back, and settled himself down opposite the door at which he had entered. But he found it very difficult to read, for he was obliged to look up every minute when the door opened. After he had run through the whole of the summary of the news of the day—without, however, taking in a single fact which was there recorded—he looked at the clock and found that he had still eleven minutes to wait. He walked to the window and looked out. People were constantly arriving—mostly men returning home after their work, and hurrying to catch their trains. Some driving up and jumping out of cabs, while the busy porters attended to their luggage; others sauntering up as if they were not going anywhere in particular.

One or two unfortunate women were walking up and down in front of the station, eyeing a tall, good-looking young private of the "Blues," one of them evidently half anxious to make friends with him, but not allowing herself that amusement at so early an hour, and every now and then turning her back upon him, with a heroic resolution to attend to business. But though Ronald could see every one who entered the station, he still turned round every time the waiting-room door opened, in case Lady Atherley should have passed him in some mysterious way. It was now two or three minutes past the quarter. "She can't be long now," he thought; so he threw his paper on the table, and walked out to the front of the station, for it would be pleasanter for her not to have to enter the waiting-room at all. For a minute or two he stood just outside the folding doors. The sun had set, and he felt cold, for he had put on a pair of light summer trousers, patent leather boots, and silk socks, to call on the Atherleys, and he had no great coat with him. Passengers hurrying in hustled him, and he had not been long standing still before the unfortunates caught sight of him, and passed by him very close, looking up into his face with a smile, and then walking on a few paces, turned back to watch the effect of their manœuvres. Still the hansoms kept driving up, but no sign of her.

He went to the window of the waiting room and looked in. An old gentleman, with his head bent forward on his chest, and his hands spread out upon his waistcoat was dozing peacefully in the corner, while two Jews, with very characteristic features, were conversing in a low but animated tone beside him. A little beyond, a lady of about five-and-thirty, with an expression of annoyance on her face, was alternately watching the door opposite to her and the little clock on the end wall. At the further end of the room, in the right-hand corner, a party of four young girls, who had evidently been sight-seeing, were chatting and laughing gaily, while two children were perched up, one upon the eldest girl's knee the other upon the seat, each with toys in one hand and a large piece of gingerbread in the other. On the left side of the room were sitting a party of three women and two men, with that look of stolid patience on their faces which people who have come up from the country for a day in town often wear during the hour or two they have to wait, in consequence of their not having taken the precaution to inquire at what time the train starts for their town. Beyond them was a young girl with a lovely face, which might have served as a model for a picture of Purity. She was attired in a simple but lady-like dress, with a light-grey silk veil turned back over her bonnet.

Just past the doorway a pair of old ladies were waiting as resignedly as possible till their train started, and in the corner two young people were holding each other's hands, and wishing the time could pass a little slower. In the centre of the room, by the farther table, sat an old gentleman, with a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses on his nose, reading the *Standard* in a low tone to an elderly lady beside him, while a boy of about twelve years old was standing uncomfortably beside them, and tearing little bits of paper off the margin of a bundle of large-type biblical texts. At the nearer table a troubled-looking man was sorting out papers, tearing up some and thrusting the pieces into his pocket, and putting others in his hat. After Ronald had looked well round the room, not forgetting to watch the people who kept walking through or peeping in at the

door for a moment, he glanced at the clock. Only five minutes to seven. After all, ten minutes was not much to be late; it is so easy to be a few minutes behind time. It was rather cold, though, so he thought he might as well go into the waiting-room again. He took a chair beside the man who was sorting papers, and without thinking what he was doing, fixed his eyes upon the letters in front of him, a proceeding which the owner of them evidently resented, for, thrusting them all into his hat, he carried them to the other side of the room.

For several minutes Ronald sat patiently watching the doors. The conversation of the Jews by the window had become so excited that they had both risen to their feet, waking up the old gentleman beside them, and they now walked out. The old man's eyes followed them with a look of disgust, and then, taking out his watch, he started to his feet, and hurriedly seizing his hat and umbrella, rushed out of the room, apparently in time to catch his train, as he did not return.

Suddenly the idea occurred to Ronald that there might be another waiting-room. It was ten minutes past seven. How fearful, if Lady Atherley should have been waiting in some other room all this time, or, worse still, if she should have got tired of waiting and gone home. He walked out and took a rapid survey of the station. No; it seemed unlikely that she could have made any mistake about the meeting-place; at any rate, she was not in the station. He hurried back to his post again. The old gentleman who had been reading the *Standard* had discovered the damage which his son had been doing to the roll of texts, and was scolding him for it.

The two old ladies were gone. The young lovers who had sat next to them were just leaving the room with mournful faces. The young girls in the opposite corner of the room were still talking and laughing, but the children with them had finished their ginger-bread, and were now sleeping uncomfortably. A widow in deep mourning with tearful eyes had just come in with a boy in a new midshipman's uniform, and sitting down took his hand in hers and talked to him in short, low sentences, interrupted by pauses. The country

people on the left side of the room were still sitting with the same expression on their faces. Ronald sat down next to the lady, who, like himself, was constantly watching the clock. The indignation depicted upon her countenance was intense. A young man of stylish appearance, but scarcely more than two or three-and-twenty, entered. She started to her feet, her eyes flashing and her hand clenched. But she managed to get out of the room before her wrath burst forth. Then Ronald heard, "It is most disgraceful," as they walked away together. The young girl in the grey veil was still sitting in her place, and looking at the floor with an expression of patient modesty which was very charming.

An elderly man who had walked through the room once or twice, staring hard at her, now took a seat beside her, and after a few minutes Ronald was surprised to see him walk across the room with her and go out, while he heard her say, "Well, I think the Continental Hotel will give us a better dinner." The clock, ticking on with the same low, monotonous sound, now pointed to half-past seven. Ronald could sit still no longer. Now, for the first time, he thought of the possibility of Lady Atherley having repented of her promise to come. How long should he wait—till eight, till nine, till the station closed? He knew so little of her or her habits. He felt faint and thirsty, and longed to go out to the bar to get a glass of sherry, but it was so late now that he dared not. Lady Atherley might come now and look in at the waiting-room at any moment, and then if she did not see him at once she would be sure to conclude that he was tired of waiting, and had left. He could only go out to the front again, and walk up and down. One of the ladies of the pavement had found the young private of the "Blues" too handsome to be resisted, so she had spoken to him, and now, much to his delight, she was walking away with her arm through his.

It was very chilly. Ronald walked up and down more rapidly, taking a wider beat, and going right down as far as the outer gates, where a Frenchwoman greeted him with a "*Dites donc, Monsieur*" the first time he came

near her, and each time he passed her made him some offer more familiar than the last. Ronald was growing every moment more impatient. Every two or three minutes he would hurry into the waiting-room. How he longed for the stolid patience of those country people, who looked as if they were quite content to sit there for the remainder of their lives. Now a cheery-looking red-faced old gentleman in a thick great-coat, with a woollen muffler round his neck, and his arms laden with various parcels, came in, and was greeted with a cry of delight by the four young girls, who took his parcels from him, and, dragging the two little children with them, followed him out of the waiting-room, all talking and laughing together. Ronald's anxiety was growing unbearable. Twenty minutes to eight—was it any use waiting any longer? He walked out once more; a victoria with a pair of handsome bays was just entering the gates. A tall lady and a child were sitting in it. Could it be she? Was it not unwise to stand out there where the coachman and footman would see him speak to her?

He darted into the waiting-room again and stood close to the door. In a minute or two a footman in a handsome livery came into the room. Ronald's heart beat quickly. "She has sent him in," he thought; "will he know me?" and he advanced a step; but the footman, taking no notice of him, walked up to an old gentleman, and, touching his hat, waited respectfully while his master gathered up his stick and gloves, and then followed him out to the carriage. As it drove away, Ronald's last hope seemed to go with it. "How could I have been such a fool as to suppose she would come," he thought. "I might have known that if she had a moment to reflect she would never keep her promise."

"Here it is a quarter to eight, and I suppose I must wait here for at least another half hour, though I know she won't come now." Oh how he wished he dared to go round to her house to ask if anything had happened.

At that moment a hansom drove up. In the growing darkness he could scarcely distinguish the occupant of it, but he felt that it was she. Forgetting all the measures of prudence which he had intended to adopt

in order to prevent their meeting being observed, he stepped forward to the hansom and held out his hand. Lady Atherley sprang lightly from the cab. Ronald took off his hat with much the same bow as he would have given to a perfect stranger.

"You are cross," said Lady Atherley, quickly.

"No, but I fear you have come to tell me that something has gone wrong."

"No, I haven't; it is all right."

Ronald hailed another hansom, and they drove off to the Holborn Restaurant. As soon as they were in the cab, Lady Atherley said:—

"I am afraid you have been waiting a long time. I hope you did not mind it much."

"Oh, never mind about that since you are here now," answered Ronald, taking both her hands in his. "I felt your not coming, and I feared you would not come, but now I have forgotten that. I have no room for any feeling but that of happiness now."

"You are awfully good, but I really could not help it. You know one isn't always free. People came in. Of course, because I wanted them to go they sat like stones. It's always like that, isn't it?" and with a little silvery laugh, which showed her white teeth, she leant back in the cab and pressed his hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LADY OF FASHION.

WHEN Lady Atherley hinted that the lateness of her arrival was due to the fact that she was not free, she said that which was literally true, though her bondage was not quite of that inevitable character which she had led Ronald to believe. It was equally true that she had been detained by visitors, for Ronald had scarcely left the house when two gentlemen drove up

to the door, and the footman announced "Prince Nieszczewski and Captain Greville."

The former was a tall, dark man, with a huge black moustache, very small grey eyes, a prominent nose, and sunken cheeks of a sallow hue. He was slight, and might have been of any age from thirty-five to fifty. Though he was ugly, still his ugliness was of that interesting kind which obliges one to look at it again and again, when a much handsomer face would make no impression; his hands were very white and small, and his dress (frock-coat and shepherd's-plaid trousers) was one of Poole's *chefs d'œuvre*, and when he sat down his trousers were raised enough to show a very neat foot clad in a bright yellow silk sock and admirably-fitting patent leather shoe.

Captain Greville was rather a contrast to his friend. He was scarcely more than five feet eight or nine inches in height. He was about forty-five, but looked younger. His yellow moustache was small and neat, and turned up at the points. His features were very regular, and he had frank, laughing blue eyes. He wore a rough brown tweed suit, which fitted his well-proportioned figure loosely, but yet showed it off to great advantage.

"We've come round to see if you will dine with us, and go to the Lyceum Theatre to-night?" said he, sitting down on an ottoman with the air of a man who is quite at home, and putting his right foot on his left knee. "We both feel rather dull, and so we thought you would brighten us up a bit."

"Well, my dear Arthur, I am awfully sorry you should just have pitched upon to-night, because I am going to dine with my sister Kate, and, indeed, I ought to be dressing now. I should so much have liked to come."

"Oh, bother Kate; send round to her and say you will go to her to-morrow; and now just run upstairs, and Nieszczewski and I will go down into your boudoir and have a cigar, while you are dressing."

"But I really can't come to-night, Arthur, for I promised Kate faithfully to go to her, and she is awfully depressed to-day, and has a number of things to tell me."

"Oh, nonsense, Connie; you don't mean to say that you are going to send us away alone—we can't hear of it, can we, Boguslav?"

"Of course, if Lady Atherley can be persuaded to accompany us, we shall have a delightful evening, instead of an ordinary and possibly dull one; but great as would be the pleasure which she would give us by agreeing to come with us, I do not fail to see that she is very anxious to keep her engagement to-night, and therefore I cannot be so selfish as to use any arguments to induce her to change her determination."

"Thank you, Prince," said Lady Atherley, admiring the tact which had enabled him to guess that she was really unwilling to go with them. "I trust you will both understand how sorry I am not to be able to come with you, and I can only hope that you will both be able to renew your invitation shortly on some more lucky occasion, for I am sure we should have a very jolly evening."

"Well, I suppose if you won't come, you won't," said Captain Greville, rather huffily. "Good-bye." And the two men left the room. But they did not go out; for on the way down Captain Greville took his friend into the dining-room to show him a painting.

"It is very odd," he said; "I can't think why she won't come; I never knew her refuse to come with me before—least of all would she put me off for her sister. What do you think of it?"

"I think, my poor old fellow," answered Nieszczewski, with a foreign accent only just sufficiently perceptible to add an additional charm to the sweetness of his voice, "that there is a man in the case. I hope you don't think it brutal of me," he continued, "to break in upon the sweetness of your dream of love by so rude a suggestion, but between friends it is better to speak plainly, and I can only tell you that there is a *Je ne sais quoi* about her manner to-day which convinces me that your star is no longer in the ascendant."

Captain Greville had immense faith in the penetration of his friend, and therefore these few sentences (in spite of the *grassement* which Prince Boguslav Nieszczewski's lady friends found so charming) fell

harshly on his ear. "Wait here a moment," he said, "I must see her alone"; and he ran upstairs to the drawing-room, where Lady Atherley was waiting to hear them leave the house before going upstairs to dress.

"Connie," he said, as he burst into the room somewhat roughly, "what is the meaning of this? where are you going to-night?"

"Haven't I told you that I am going to my sister's."

"Yes, but who is to be there?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, Connie, there is some mystery here, I am sure. You would not dine with her when I ask you to come with me, unless there were something in it. Tell me what it is. I insist upon knowing."

"Arthur," said Lady Atherley, drawing herself up to her full height, "I have told you I am going to Kate to-night; whether you believe it or not, matters little to me. Go and dine with her yourself if you wish, and then you can find out for yourself whether I am there or not, and you can see who else is there. At any rate, I tell you I am going there, because it suits me that you should believe it. That should be enough for you."

"But, darling Connie," he objected, "I don't want to be nasty to you, only do tell me, is there another man in the case? I know it is foolish to be jealous, but I have loved you now for so many years, and I can't bear to think of it. Have you ceased to care for me?"

He had taken both her hands in his; she bent forward and kissed him.

"You silly old boy," she said, "I will never give you up for anyone in the world. Be satisfied."

The great charm of her manner soothed his jealous fears, and he asked her forgiveness. It was granted at once, but it took some time to talk about. She was longing that he would go, but she would not let him see her anxiety to get rid of him, for she would have been sorry to lose his friendship; and so, while he talked on, she was thinking over their flirtation, and wondering whether it had at last come to an end.

It was an old story. Years and years ago, when she was quite a little girl, she had seen him for the first

time. He was a distant cousin of hers, and she remembered how he had come round in his new ensign's uniform to say good-bye to her mother before starting for the Crimea. Then she had seen him again when he came back from China, and seemed to think much of himself, and was always snubbing her.

After that he had been abroad again, and they did not meet until she was seventeen. And how his manner had changed by that time. It was her turn to be grand and mighty then. And when he proposed for her she was half sorry for him. He pleaded his love so earnestly, she did not know whether to laugh or to cry, so she ended by laughing, as that was easiest to her in those days, but then she had not discovered that she really liked him until her mother told her that he was a poor captain with nothing but his pay and was consequently not to be thought of. But she had thought of him, and if only they could have foreseen that his aunt would leave him all her money, and that the death of his elder brothers would some day put him in possession of Gwensyllt; but then you can't marry a penniless soldier on the chance of his relatives conveniently dropping out of the way, and if you did they'd be sure to live for ever. From the time she first entered her teens her mother and sisters had instilled into her mind the absolute necessity of marrying money, so that she scarcely thought it more possible to marry a man without it than to look for a husband within the proscribed degrees of kindred. And so when she first met Sir Algernon Atherley at dinner, and heard of his property in Lancashire, his shooting box in Scotland, his horses at Epsom, and his houses in London, she was satisfied to overlook the fact that he might have been her father, and when she came home that night and her mother asked her how she liked him, she had answered, "Oh, he's well enough. I shall marry him." And she did.

For a short time she was pleased with her newly acquired wealth. She liked horses, she doted on dances, she adored dress. These tastes she was now able to indulge in to her heart's content. But when she grew accustomed to her new amusements, she

began to think that she would rather have married some younger and handsomer man; and when, after about a year, the expected advent of a child had made her figure so fearful that she was foolishly ashamed to go out, and had consequently to spend a good many evenings alone with Sir Algernon, she found out that he had a nasty, crochety temper of his own, and she grew somehow to think of him more as a rather disagreeable father than as a husband.

It was about this time that she again met Arthur Greville. She had never seen him since the day that she refused his offer of marriage. It was a lovely afternoon in early spring, and her husband, who sometimes lunched at home in those days, had been very disagreeable all the morning—not that she cared about that, at least she wouldn't for worlds have him think she did—but still when he went out she felt rather upset, so she opened the window and sat behind the curtain, looking out at the bright April sunshine, and thinking about so many things, that at last her eyes brimmed over and two large tears trickled down her cheeks and fell upon the piece of embroidery which she had been pretending to work at for the last twelve months. She had admiration enough to turn any girl's head—and money?—yes, plenty of it—but not one heart to love her.

"Poor Arthur," she thought, "he did love me so truly; what a fool I have been! and now, no doubt, he despises me, for he must know that I have sold myself." But her set now was not his set; she was not likely to meet him, and he evidently did not intend to call upon her. Just then she noticed a man coming along the street. "How like him," she thought; a minute later he was almost opposite the window; she sprang to her feet—letting the embroidery fall on the floor—and tapped on the window pane. He turned his head. "It is he," she cried, and she beckoned him to come upstairs. But as soon as he knocked at the door she repented. What would he think of her in her present condition? she was such a sight now.

But he was so kind in his manner—he didn't really seem to notice anything; though, of course, he must

have, for she was quite certain it would be twins, at least. He was rather grave, though, and distant; and when he called her Lady Atherley at every moment she felt that she could not address him by his Christian name, though she longed to do so. Though the tears still glistened on her cheeks she was all laughter and smiles now, and her face, which never was so pretty before, he thought, reminded him of the April sunshine and raindrops outside.

An hour flew swiftly by. There was so much to tell on both sides. What had he been doing with himself? He had married. She looked on him so reproachfully when she heard this that he felt almost like a criminal, and they both forgot that it was all her fault. Of course she wanted to know all about his wife. "Was she lovely?" "Of course he doted on her," and a thousand more questions.

He had married, he said, for no reason that he could well understand—perhaps because his wife was so very unlike her—perhaps because she had been very sympathetic during his great trouble.

"She is not pretty, but she is a thoroughly good, homely creature, bent on being a good wife to me," said he, "and please God, I shall do my duty to her."

"How nice it is to see you again," said Lady Atherley; "you must bring Mrs. Greville, if she won't hate me, and you must often come to see me, for you know I have always liked you so much, and we can be great friends now. We must forget the past—at least anything in it that is disagreeable—and be like brother and sister."

And Arthur Greville did come often, and he did bring his wife, but she did not care for Lady Atherley, and Lady Atherley declared that she glared at her and hated her, and after a time Mrs. Greville gave up coming, except to formal dinner parties, and Arthur Greville and Lady Atherley became great friends—only their intimacy was not quite like that between a brother and sister. There was a strong flavour of romance about it.

But it was not until after the birth of her second child that anything worse than romance came of this friendship. How it had happened she never knew. They

had long believed that they loved each other. They had been to theatres together, and had dined together whenever they had had the opportunity; so often, in fact, that they both thought there was no danger about it. And at last one night, neither of them knew how, the friendship had ceased to be platonic, for Lady Atherley seemed to care less and less for her husband.

For more than a year Constance had found in this passion a solace for every domestic annoyance—a complement for every void of her existence. Then occurred the accident by which Captain Greville had been suddenly endowed with a large fortune. Hitherto his opportunities of being alone with her had been comparatively rare, and both of them argued (with a not uncommon misconception of the basis of real happiness) that if they found so much pleasure in each other's society during the infrequent occasions which circumstances allowed, they needed only increased facilities of meeting to obtain more and more happiness.

And now commenced in Lady Atherley's mind a longing to visit seaside places, a longing which Sir Algernon was loth to gratify, for he hated the sea and everything pertaining thereto. But when her elder sister, Mrs. Huntingdon, who had lately been left a widow, offered to take her to Bournemouth, he was glad to let her go and obtain the change she desired without bothering him.

It naturally happened that Captain Greville had chosen the same time to visit Bournemouth, but as he invariably returned to town from Friday till Monday, the only days during which Sir Algernon could get away, and as he lived at a different hotel, appearances were preserved, and everything went on happily. Of course, Mrs. Huntingdon was not long blind to her sister's faults, but she was badly off, and it suited her in every way to be on the best of terms with the Atherleys, for at their house she had opportunities of meeting many men eligible enough to be possible successors to Mr. Huntingdon, and the dinners and presents which her sister gave her were not to be despised by a woman of her limited means. She therefore contented herself with giving Lady Atherley

a few good-humoured words of warning, and discreetly retired to her own room whenever she thought herself *de trop*.

But these clandestine meetings soon seemed unsatisfactory, and Lady Atherley and her cousin dreamed of being quite alone together. He was now rich. He accordingly bought a yacht, and when Sir Algernon returned to town on Monday morning, his wife and Captain Greville started off with a fair breeze for the coast of France, leaving Kate Huntingdon on guard at Bournemouth, while the two, secure from all surprise, passed two or three days in some small town in Normandy, taking care to be back in England by Saturday morning.

But two or three years of this intimacy led to the natural result. The romance of the situation gradually wore off, and they now regarded each other almost as bound to each other. The enforced separation which they were occasionally compelled to undergo prevented their relations from falling quite within the boundary of the common-place, but still they both found that it was rather pleasant than otherwise to make acquaintance with any travellers they might come across whenever they felt that they could do so with any reasonable degree of safety.

So things had gone on until Lady Atherley began to find the old weariness returning upon her, and Arthur Greville was no longer able to dispel it. In the gaiety of a London season she sought in vain for any mitigation of her *ennui*. The admiration she received palled upon her. Her ambition was to inspire a *grande passion*. But though she often met men who at first sight seemed likely to conceive such a passion for her, yet it always turned out that they either desired her beauty from personal motives or wished to enjoy a little meaningless flirtation, or, worse still, that they were anxious through her to make use of her husband's influence.

One evening Captain Greville had taken her and Mrs. Huntingdon to dine at the "Continental." As they entered the hall a tall man raised his hat with a peculiarly graceful air, and was passing on into the dining-room, when Captain Greville shouted out, "Why, Boguslav, when did you come back? Let me

introduce you to Lady Atherley ; you have both heard of each other often. Connie, this is Prince Nieszczevski. I'm so glad you've met at last ; of course, you will dine with us ? ”

“ With the greatest goodwill in the world,” said the Prince. “ I have only returned to England to-day, and I felt it was useless to look for any companion to-night, as no one expected me, and so I had just made up my mind to have a melancholy dinner by myself. Ah, Lady Atherley, if Captain Greville possessed the talent of word painting, I ought to know you well ; but I find he is but an indifferent artist.”

Lady Atherley did not answer.

“ How plain he is,” she was thinking, “ but how his face lights up when he speaks.”

CHAPTER IX.

A FOREIGN PRINCE.

PRINCE BOGUSLAV NIESCZEWSKI was the last representative of an ancient Austrian family. He had come to England at the age of fifteen to spend a year at Eton, and there he had imbibed so strong a taste for English sports that he had returned to this country as soon as he was master of his own fortunes. At Eton he had conceived a great admiration for Arthur Greville, who was captain of the cricket eleven and winner of most of the athletic contests of the year, and the friendship which there arose between them had been renewed on his return. Now that he was grown up his love of boating, cricket, and football had been replaced by a passion for hunting, racing, and shooting ; and although he sometimes spent a few months in Vienna, he made England his home.

His wealth and rank made him an object of special interest to every mother with marriageable

daughters. But, after encouraging the hopes of several of them, he had disappointed them all by marrying, at thirty-five, a pretty little orphan girl, who refused him twice before he finally persuaded her to take him, and ended by falling desperately in love with him, and becoming the most jealous of wives, after all.

But though he and Greville were both married, the friendship between them never diminished. On the contrary, neither of them had a secret from the other, and Greville had poured all his sorrows about his heartless Constance into the Prince's sympathetic ear; and later, when she had beckoned him up from the street that sunny April afternoon, he had no sooner left her than he jumped into a cab and went straight to his friend with a full account of the interview. "Take care," said the Prince, when he had heard his friend to the end; "that woman is going to love you; it is very dangerous for both of you."

Afterwards, when Greville would come to him and give him a joyful account of some meeting with Lady Atherley, the Prince would shake his head sadly and say, "I wish you would fall in love with some shining light of the stage, or of the *demi monde*. This woman is not good enough for you."

And then Greville would be angry, and accuse his friend of blasphemy.

At last one day Nieszczewski came to his friend and said, "Laugh at me, Arthur—I am in love—and with whom you will never guess, not in three, not in twenty, not in a lifetime. If I were ashamed to tell you anything I should be ashamed to confess this."

"Well," answered Greville, "tell me all about it, and you will find me more sympathetic than you are."

"Know, then, that my Dulcinea is a flower girl in Covent Garden Market."

"Why, hang it all——"

"You don't understand me—how should you? No, Arthur; call me a fool—a madman, if you like—but I really love that girl. When I first saw her I thought she was pretty, and I bought a flower from her, and gave her some chaff, which she answered so prettily that I gave her a sovereign. When I got home

I could not help thinking of her; so, hoping to put an end to this infatuation, I decided to spare no efforts or expense in improving her condition. When I went to see her, she had put on a simple tweed dress which I had sent her, with clean collar and cuffs, and her golden hair was just twisted up neatly on the top of her head, and yet she looked so graceful that I thought I had never seen anyone better dressed, and to-day I have just bought a little furnished house at Brompton, and told her to order whatever she wants."

"Well, this is one of the most extraordinary fancies I ever heard of," answered Greville, "but you can afford it; and though, of course, a girl with such antecedents is likely to spend more than a duchess, you will doubtless get tired of her soon, so that I suppose I must not be too severe upon you."

"I am not so sure of my getting over it at once," said the Prince, "for I am going to bring her out on the stage. I have seen the manager of the Frivolity Theatre, who as you know can refuse me nothing, and he has promised to give her a good part in a burlesque. If she shows any talent she is to have the chief part."

"And if she should prove utterly incapable of learning it?" asked Greville.

"Why, then she is to have a part written for her, or rather devised for her, in which she has not a word to say. All she will have to do will be to laugh and look pretty, and as she does both *à ravir* there is only the dress to be thought about, and I am planning one for her."

"If you attend to that department she is sure to look her best."

"Yes, I will answer for that. But you know, Arthur, my theory is that even if she should spend more than a duchess, I shall be wiser to choose her than to select a person of that less extravagant rank. Depend upon it a woman of position is the worst in every way for such a situation. But we shall never agree upon that, I fear, at least not until you have conquered your passion for Lady Atherley."

"And that day is far distant," answered Greville, "whereas I trust your infatuation has already reached its highest point, and will wane as rapidly as it has waxed."

But the Prince's infatuation had not yet reached its apogee, for his new *protégée* came out on the stage a few days later, and proved a success; she had a good voice, some idea of humour, a lovely figure, and a certain amount of vulgarity which was not out of place in burlesque. Then she did not sing very much out of tune, and she soon learnt to dance a break-down with a good deal of spirit. Such a woman was sure to attract men, and Prince Nieszczeniowski was proud to see them crowding round her; but before long a suspicion crossed his mind that she was beginning to listen to some of them rather too favourably. Then London was astonished and scandalized to hear that the Prince had announced to his wife his intention of leaving her here with a handsome allowance, and taking Hettie Vandeleur, as she was called, to make a tour of the world. At first people looked upon the story as a silly piece of gossip, but as it became known that it was an accomplished fact, and not merely a paragraph in the society journals, everybody realised the fact that they had never expected anything different from Nieszczeniowski—"these foreigners are so utterly unreasonable, you know."

And how the ninety and nine mothers who had failed to hook this big fish revelled in the story. How they turned it this way and that way, and embellished it with details only fit to be whispered at five o'clock tea; and how they professed to rejoice that when he paid attention to their Graces, or Georgianas, or Eleanors, they had at once told those darling girls that they must never think of marrying a foreigner, a Roman Catholic, etc., etc. The Princess alone seemed to bear the story with equanimity.

"He will get over this fancy," she said, "and then he will come back to me."

"How sweet and forgiving," said some.

"How spiritless," said others.

"How wise of her," said a few.

"It is positively disgusting of her," said many; "she does not say one word to show that she disapproves of it. It is no wonder her husband has behaved so badly since she doesn't seem to have any horror of vice."

But soon the world said no more about it. Months passed by and no one heard anything of the Prince until this night when he turned up at the "Continental" and sat down to dinner with Captain Greville, Lady Atherley, and Mrs. Huntingdon. The dinner passed off very pleasantly. Nieszczewski was delighted to get back to London: Greville was glad to see his old friend, and Lady Atherley and her sister were charmed to meet this man of whom they had heard so much.

After dinner the conversation grew more confidential. Captain Greville and Lady Atherley began to call each other by their Christian names. Mrs. Huntingdon was trying to make her eyes as expressive as possible when she looked at the Prince.

"Tell us, Boguslav," said Greville, leaning back in his chair and lighting a cigarette, "how you came to leave us so suddenly?"

"You remember my infatuation for Hettie Vandeleur," began the Prince, "an actress at the Frivolity, whom you may have seen," he continued, turning to Lady Atherley with an explanatory gesture. "But I think, Arthur, I'll tell you about it 'under four eyes,' as we say in Vienna."

"No, no," cried Lady Atherley, with her silvery laugh, "we are dying to know all about it; you know how tantalising it is to hear half a story, and though it was very indiscreet of Arthur he has told me all the first part about your romantic meeting in Covent Garden."

"Don't talk about indiscretion, Connie," said Captain Greville, looking rather annoyed.

"For goodness sake, don't quarrel, it is so dull," said Mrs. Huntingdon, with a feigned expression of *ennui* upon her face; "besides, you are interrupting Prince Nieszczewski."

"Well," said the Prince, with the slightest touch of irony in his tone, "it seems you are bound to hear it second hand in any case, and since the ladies desire to hear the confession of my follies, I am only too delighted to gratify their wish. When I first conceived this strange passion for Miss Vandeleur, I was too much in love to take much trouble in concealing it. I at-

tended every performance at the Frivolity, and my brougham was always at the stage-door to take her away when her part was over. People soon began to talk of it, and though I made some efforts to keep my faults concealed from my wife, I was not very sorry when some good friend informed her of them. The truth is, that I could not bear the deception of it. To come home to her day after day with falsehood in my heart was sickening to me, and, therefore, on the first hint which she gave me I confessed all. 'Boguslav,' she said, 'you must give up this woman.' I refused, and told her how impossible it would be for me to conquer my new-born love; but I added that she might keep to her own suite of apartments—that we need not meet except in the drawing-room and before the world. This offer she rejected scornfully. 'I am your lawful wife,' she said, 'and so long as I bear that title I will be your wife, and not a puppet, to be brought out and placed at the head of your table, like some piece of family plate, when you have guests. No; if you are so weak that you cannot overcome this disgraceful fancy you can at least treat me with that deference which, as my husband, you owe me, and conceal from me and the world the shameful ties which you have contracted. If you are not prepared to do this I shall leave your house and return to my mother.' I thought over all that my wife had said to me, and I found that it was not in my nature to keep up this daily deception; but, on the other hand, I thought it unfair that any fault of mine should deprive the Princess of that comfort and position to which, as my wife, she was justly entitled. I accordingly went to my bankers and ordered them to honour her drafts as they would my own, and, sending her a cheque-book, and a letter in which I thanked her for her past conduct to me, told her the result of my cogitations. Then I started with Hettie to make a tour of some months' duration, according as the fancy took us. The tour is over and here I am in London again."

"And I sincerely hope you have repented of your folly," said Greville.

"It may be folly," said Lady Atherley, "but to my

mind there is something grander in it than in half the wisdoms of our every-day life. I have seen Miss Vandeleur, and I own I did not think her capable of inspiring so great a passion, but, of course, it is difficult for one woman to judge of another. You men are generally so selfish that it is quite refreshing to hear of one of you giving up anything for a woman's sake. Don't you think so, Kate?"

"Delightfully romantic," answered Mrs. Huntingdon, "you are quite like Armand in the 'Dame aux Camelias;' but what has become of Miss Vandeleur? I shall certainly go and see her as soon as she begins to act again."

"Oh, yes;" said Lady Atherley, "won't it be interesting?"

"I fear she will never act again," said Nieszczewski, sadly.

"But why, she is not dead, is she?" asked Greville.

"No. The story is a sad one for me, but I will tell it you shortly. We went to Russia first. There I got into a duel about her with a foolish boy. I fired in the air the first time, but he insisted on another shot. I aimed at his feet the next time and hit him; but he was not satisfied. The seconds interfered, but he said he would go on till I gave up all pretensions to Hettie, whom he meant to marry. I could not stand up to be shot at all day, for although he was evidently unused to handle a pistol he might hit me by chance—so I aimed at his right hand. Unfortunately my ball struck the barrel of his pistol, and glancing off it penetrated his eyeball, and entered the brain. We left Russia after that, and went to Italy, where we were very happy, but after a time Hettie said she would like to see Paris.

"One night we went to the 'Folies Marigny.' Hettie was delighted, and said she would give anything to get an engagement there. I was so infatuated at that time that I could not understand why she should want to act in such a theatre, where the plays were stupid and the acting of the poorest; but I procured an engagement for her. It was not long before I discovered her motive. One morning I went to her apartment much earlier than usual, and there I found one

of the low comedians, with one of her satin cloaks thrown round his legs, drinking chocolate with her. I kicked the brute out; but Hettie sulked all day, and that night she did not turn up at the theatre. For some days I looked for her in vain; but after a week I heard that she had been arrested by the police. It appears that her wretched paramour could not remain faithful to her even for that short time. Hettie was jealous. She stooped to crime to get rid of her competitor. She procured some vitriol, and tried to throw it in her rival's face. She was only partially successful—a struggle ensued in which both women were fearfully burned. Hettie lost one eye, and will wear a fearful scar on one cheek till she dies. The other woman is even worse disfigured. I have settled a pension on Hettie when she comes out of prison, but I can never bear to see her again, for her scars would constantly remind me of her perfidy and ingratitude."

Nieszczewski ceased, a shadow seemed to have spread over his features, his eyes were fixed on vacancy, and for the moment he was unconscious of the presence of his hearers.

Lady Atherley was the first to break the silence.

"What a hideous ending to your romance," she said. "And do you think of staying any time here?" she asked, after a moment's pause, during which she thought, "That is the sort of passion I should like to inspire—a love that throws everything to the winds, and is proud to acknowledge itself in the face of day."

"I hope to make London my home once more," answered the Prince, "and, if possible, to forget this miserable story."

"Ah, what a pity your love was so ill bestowed," said Mrs. Huntingdon, with one of her most winning smiles.

"Yes, if you had only chosen some lady instead of this low-born girl, how much happier you would have been, both of you," said Lady Atherley.

"I am not so sure of that," said the Prince, fixing his dark eyes upon her with a glance which seemed to penetrate her soul.

She returned his gaze with an expression of trustful sympathy on her face. The tears rose in her eyes,

and trickled slowly down her cheeks. She bent her head low, and, dipping her table-napkin in the rose-water in her finger-glass, she managed to wash the tears away unnoticed. She was thinking what a pity it was that Prince Nieszczeniowski had not loved her instead of this wretched flower-girl. "And how well his romantic nature would have suited me," she fancied. "Arthur is awfully good and kind, of course, but he is so matter-of-fact."

"And how about your wife?" asked Greville. "Will you see her?"

"Yes, I hope so," answered the Prince, not noticing Lady Atherley's remark, "I had the courage to leave her for Hettie Vandeleur. Surely I shall have the courage to go back to her and say that I recognise my error. You, Arthur, will go to her to-morrow for me and ask her when she will see me. I have no intention of asking her to receive me as her husband again. But I feel that I owe it to her to let her have the satisfaction of knowing that at least my desertion of her has not been a gain to me."

"I will go with all my heart," answered Greville. "I own that I was not so pleased at the account of your leaving her as these ladies seem to have been. It may have been honest, though I'm hanged if I think it redounded to your honour. But knowing your character as I do, I learn that you intend going back to your wife with feelings of unmixed satisfaction. It may not be romantic, but I think it is the manly thing to do."

The party now broke up. When they got back to Grosvenor Square, Lady Atherley and her sister discussed their new acquaintance with Captain Greville. Lady Atherley thought him delightful. Mrs. Huntingdon could not help acknowledging the great charm of his manner, but she thought he was too like Mephistopheles, and would make a first rate "demon" in a novel. But both of them agreed that there was something grand in his leaving his wife. "It was so honest, so straightforward."

"But deuced rough on the Princess, though," said Captain Greville. "You don't look at the thing fairly," he went on; "of course Nieszczeniowski is a most fascinating

man, and so all you women fall into raptures about him, and sympathise with him at once. Now I have known him since he was a child, and I know that he is one of the best fellows that ever breathed; but he is rather selfish, and then he is so Quixotic that, like the old knight of La Mancha, his determination to do the right thing often falls very hard on those around him. You only think of his honesty, but suppose for a moment that either of you were the victim of it. How would it be if he had married one of you?"

"It would never have been at all," answered Lady Atherley, "for if I had married a man like that I should have known how to keep him."

"Yes, of course, one would," chimed in Mrs. Huntingdon.

"Possibly," said Greville, incredulously.

"No, not possibly, but certainly," retorted Lady Atherley, growing rather cross. "Why, my dear Arthur, do you think you would have been tempted to leave me if we had been husband and wife? Haven't we been friends and not casual friends, but the most intimate of friends for years? Don't you know all my faults? and have you ever felt for one moment that any actress or flower-girl in the world was capable of taking you away from me?"

"Hush, Connie," said Mrs. Huntingdon, who always made a point of ignoring the terms of intimacy which existed between Captain Greville and her sister, and always gave her some gentle admonition when she was speaking too openly. "How flattered Prince Nieszczevski ought to be if he knew that we were getting so animated over him."

"He must be accustomed to that by this time," said Greville, "for women always do get animated over him. But you know, Connie, you must not think that, because I have never changed towards you in all these years that he never would. He and I are so very different."

"Oh, you are," retorted Lady Atherley, "more's the pity of it. I can't think what makes you so disagreeable to-night; you are quite bearish; you had better go now and come back in a better temper."

"Temper, Connie, what do you mean? I never was

more cheerful in my life. You don't think I've shown any signs of temper, do you, Kate?"

"Well, I think you are very rude and unkind to Connie," answered Mrs. Huntingdon, who always made a point of taking her sister's part. Lady Atherley, finding that her sister sympathised with her, felt an immense pity for herself, and the tears rose in her eyes. Though Captain Greville could not help thinking her a little unreasonable, he felt sorry, and stepped forward to take her hand. But she drew it quickly away and left the room.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, looking quite disconcerted. "I can't think what I've said. Shall I go up and see?"

"No; it is very late, and Sir Algernon may be back any minute. You had better drive me back now."

"But what did I say? How did I offend her?"

"How dense you men are; but don't bother about it. I think Connie is tired to-night, and will be all right to-morrow."

The next day Mrs. Huntingdon came round to lunch with her sister, and talk over their new acquaintance of the night before.

"Of course, Arty is the dearest old fellow in the world," said Lady Atherley, "and I should be a perfect brute if I ever gave him up, after all he has done for me. But he is so dreadfully prosaic and humdrum. Fancy his going to Mrs. Greville and telling her that he couldn't see her any more, because he loved some one else. Why, he wouldn't even get her to give up having a dinner-party once, though I warned him that I should want him to take me somewhere on that evening, and only two or three invitations had been sent out, so that she could easily have written to change the day."

"Well, but I think he is right, dear. Remember, if he made any fuss with his wife, it would most likely compromise you."

"And what would I care about being compromised by a man who was willing to give up everything for me. There's no doubt about it, Englishmen don't understand how to love. Fancy the story of the 'Dame aux Camelias' taking place in England—why it is

preposterous"—and Lady Atherley laughed at the idea.

For some time after that, Captain Greville often brought his Austrian friend with him, either to dinner or to the theatre, and Lady Atherley half unconsciously did her best to fascinate him. But in vain. He paid her the prettiest compliments, and seemed always glad to see her; but she felt that she made no impression whatever upon his heart, and whenever they were left alone for a moment she felt that a wall of ice grew up between them at once, a barrier which her sweetest smiles and warmest glances were quite powerless to melt, and so the fancy which she had taken for him wore off, and she almost hated him whenever he was away, though she always felt his wonderful power of fascination whenever he spoke to her. She still wished that she could make some impression on him, but it was only wounded vanity which inspired that wish, and it is most probable that if she could have obtained a declaration of love from him she would have enjoyed her triumph for half an hour and then have rejected his advances with scorn. But next to getting him to acknowledge her power, she wished to be able to overcome the charm which he still exercised over her, and therefore it was with a feeling of additional satisfaction that she refused the invitation to dine with him and Captain Greville on that afternoon of Ronald Macleod's first visit.

When at last Captain Greville, somewhat soothed and reassured by Lady Atherley's parting words, went down to rejoin his friend, and she heard the door close behind them, she looked at the clock and thought, "Poor fellow, he must be at the station now, and I have still to dress." She half thought of keeping on the same dress, but that seemed almost too much to her, so she persuaded herself that he would rather wait a little longer and see her in a more becoming costume. She ran upstairs and put on a black silk jersey and skirt, a silver collar and earrings to match, and while poor Ronald was waiting and wondering at Charing Cross Station whether she would come or not she was deliberating with her maid as to whether she should wear plain black silk stockings with open work

fronts or others with little flowers embroidered on them in various colours, and whether she should look better in the bonnet Madame Elise had made for her with the white stephanotis or whether the violets in the bonnet her sister had brought from Paris would not set off the colour of her hair better.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOLBORN RESTAURANT.

WHEN the hansom stopped opposite the Holborn Restaurant, Lady Atherley glanced rapidly round to see that none of her acquaintances were passing, and then she and Ronald walked along the narrow tessellated passage which led into the balcony. Here he left her for a moment while he went to secure a table. It was late and the place was nearly full, but three people were just getting up from one of the tables in the centre of the balcony, so slipping half-a-crown into the waiter's hand, and telling him to do his best to wait well, Ronald hurried back to the entrance, and kept Lady Atherley in conversation for a moment while the waiter removed the traces of earlier guests.

"Why did you look around so suspiciously at the door?" asked Ronald.

"To see if any of my acquaintances were passing."

"But if you dreaded that why come here at all? it is more likely that you would be seen by them in the room than when just passing from a hansom to the door."

"I don't dread it, but at the same time it is better not. Don't you understand, *mon ami*?" and she followed him into the balcony.

It was a bright scene. The tables in the body of the hall were laden with imitation gold and silver, plate glass dishes containing dessert, and wine glasses of various colours; numerous gas jets shed a brilliant light

upon the scene, which was heightened and intensified by the candles placed upon the various tables.

The guests in this part of the hall were mostly men, but here and there the gaudy costume of some flashily-dressed woman would place a point of light colour in the picture. Waiters were hurrying to and fro between the guests, and the laughing chatter of the diners, the pop of champagne corks, and the clanking of knives, forks, and glasses formed a not inharmonious accompaniment to the waltz which the musicians were playing in an orchestra above the farther end of the hall.

At the height of some six or seven feet from the ground a balcony ran round the centre hall. This balcony, containing a number of small tables, each laid with four covers, was far more secluded than the large hall below, and people dining in it could scarcely be seen by anyone except the diners at the next tables; but at the same time they could look down upon the animated scene below them, and consequently these tables were much more quickly occupied than the others.

This balcony used to be to a great extent shut out from view by pillars, with curtains draped around them, which supported a gallery above. The table which Ronald had secured was close to one of these pillars, and therefore when he and Lady Atherley sat down they felt almost alone. The waltz which the orchestra was playing was "*Mon Rêve*." Lady Atherley leaned back in her chair with her eyes half closed.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Ronald.

"I was wondering whether this is really true or not; it all seems so strange, and that waltz too. How delicious, isn't it? I wonder if it is only a dream."

"I fear it must be," said Ronald. "It seems too beautiful to be real; but if it be a dream, how I pray that the awakening may be long put off."

The waiter changed the course of the conversation by handing a wine list to Ronald. Lady Atherley would not choose a wine. She didn't know what she liked, but Ronald knew enough of physiognomy to be sure that a woman possessed of her eyes and figure must like champagne, and he felt pretty safe in choosing

some that was not too "dry." But the dinner was more difficult, for it seemed to them that they had no sooner decided upon one dish than they were called upon to exercise their choice again; and, as neither of them cared in the least what was brought to them, this became a very difficult matter. But presently a very bright idea occurred to Ronald.

"Look here," he said to the waiter, "you must know which things are best, so don't ask us to choose, but just bring whatever you like." This order once given they both felt as if a weight had been lifted off their minds.

"How awfully pretty this place is," said Lady Atherley, who was too happy to see the tinsel of the decorations, the coarseness of the glass, or the tawdriness of the imitation gold and silver plate. "And it is just like being alone here," and she touched his hand for a second. At this moment a young girl with dyed hair, painted cheeks, and a blue satin dress cut *en cœur*, who with an old gentleman had been looking out for a table, said:—

"We can't get one to ourselves, so this will do," and, sitting down opposite Ronald, she proceeded to take her jacket off.

Lady Atherley began looking at the programme of music on the *menu*, without taking any notice of the new arrivals, but Ronald, who felt indignant that such a girl should sit at the same table with her, hurried off to the manager to complain.

"But there is no table disengaged," said the manager.

"I can't help that," said Ronald; "you can't expect a lady to sit at the same table with a woman of that description."

"Certainly not, sir," answered the manager, and, coming up with one of his blindest smiles, he drew the intruders away with the promise of a table to themselves.

"I am so awfully sorry," said Ronald, as soon as they were gone. "It is too hard of these wretched people to come and mar what would otherwise have been a perfect evening."

"Don't bother about them," said Lady Atherley; "they are gone, and that is the chief thing. Oh, listen! they are playing the 'Cloches de Corneville.' How I

love that piece! We heard it several times in Paris, last year. There—

‘Dans mes voyages
Combien d’orages
Que de naufrages, tra-la-la-la.’

Oh, that makes such a lovely waltz. How I should like to dance it with you, some day. Of course, you dance well?”

“No, I have given it up for some time now, and I have never learnt the new step; when I gave up the *deux temps* nine years ago and learnt the *trois temps* I found it an awful trouble to learn. But now that this new step has come in I consider myself completely shelved.”

“How funny you are,” laughed Lady Atherley, “you must come and practise it with me. I shall soon teach you, and then you will have to come down from your shelf again.”

“But I am afraid you will find me an unpromising pupil. I shall be awfully slow.”

“Not with such a teacher as I am. I have danced with some of the best dancers in Europe, in Vienna, in Paris, in Berlin, and I can show you in ten minutes how to do the step, and then the rest is practice. Will you at least try to learn?”

“How can you ask? Is there anything I would not try to learn with you as teacher?”

“Then you really like me?” said she, mischievously.

“Like you? No, I love you. Oh, Constance, how I love you; but I am no poet. I cannot tell my love, only I know that when I sit here beside you, and speak to you—when I look into your eyes like this—when I hold your hand, I feel that you must know how much I love you, and then I am happy.”

“What a dear, impulsive boy you are,” said Lady Atherley, bending forwards towards him till her hair touched his cheek. She had almost forgotten that they were in a public place, but as the waiter placed a plate before her she drew herself up suddenly. “I don’t know what makes me so hungry,” she said; “I am simply ravenous. I have eaten everything they have put before me.”

Ronald, on the contrary, had found it impossible to take anything. He had sent everything away almost without tasting it. He felt rather hungry too, but directly he put anything in his mouth he disliked it, so he watched Lady Atherley, until at last at dessert his appetite seemed to come back. There was a dish of almonds before him. With one elbow on the table he took a few in his hand and began eating them—at first scarcely touching his lips with the points of them, and then finishing them with a number of short, sharp bites, stopping every now and then to dip his fingers in the rosewater which was lying in a large gilded dish beside him.

The orchestra was playing the "Wiener Blut" waltzes, and as the third note of the first bar of the melody rang out loud and clear, the air seemed to remind him of the bold flight of some bird winging its way towards Heaven, and his soul rising on the wings of fancy bore him fearlessly into the blue empyrean of a new and passionate love.

"What a divine waltz," he said, after a short pause. "It is worthy to rank with 'Il Bacio' and the 'Blue Danube.' I never heard it before, but I feel I shall never forget it."

"No, nor I. How an air clings to one when it is heard for the first time under circumstances of peculiar sorrow or peculiar happiness. One can never hear it afterwards without returning for a moment to the same frame of mind in which one happened to be on first hearing it."

"I have felt that, but I fear it is not true in every case, otherwise what should prevent my having this waltz played to me every day for the rest of my life; if it could recall my present feelings, even for an instant, each time I heard it, I should learn it by heart to-morrow, and never cease playing it. But I should not have the courage to learn it, for I feel that, were I to do so, I should so often want to play it, that the impressions I wished to call up would soon be worn quite threadbare."

"But I hope you will not have to rely upon one air only," said Lady Atherley, with a tinge of alarm in her voice. "Is this to be our only evening of happiness

together? Shall we never hear other music together? Is our acquaintance to be a matter of memory only from this time forth?"

"No, no—a thousand times no! I could not bear to think so; don't let us even imagine the possibility of such a thing. Of course, I know that some day you will cast me aside, but let us not think of that now. I have no time for any hideous thoughts to-night."

"How very strange you are. I really think you believe that you love me, and yet here, on the very threshold of our—what shall I call it?—friendship, you begin to think of how soon we are to tire of one another."

"What! I tire of you?"

"Yes; I suppose it must be so, some day."

"Never!"

"You are right," continued Lady Atherley, scarcely noticing his very emphatic exclamation. "Your fancy for me has been so strong and so sudden that it must burn itself out soon. How long shall it last—a month?"

"Oh, Constance, how can you speak like this?"

"Is a month too long, then?" she went on, while an expression of hardness stole over her features. "I believe men are very fickle now; perhaps I have over-rated my power over you."

Why did she speak like this? She could not have told if she had stopped to inquire.

"Constance," said Ronald, earnestly, while he felt his throat suddenly growing husky, "what I have said to make you speak to me like this I cannot guess, but I feel sure that if you knew how deeply your words pain me you would not have said them. I know, of course, that all things human have an end sooner or later—happiness, alas! soonest of all—and, therefore, a day must inevitably come when the best I can hope is that you will look upon me as one of your dear friends. I wish I could die before that day dawns; but people never die at the right time except in novels, and therefore I implore of you that when that time does come you will not cast me off suddenly—I could not bear it—but let me guess gradually that I may no longer love you, and that my dream is over."

Ronald had grown very pale. His eyes looked large and lustrous, and there was a slight tremor in his voice. Lady Atherley put her hand upon his, and pressed it. She felt that he really loved her, and her vanity was gratified, for never before had she made so complete a conquest, and yet there was a feeling of disappointment in her mind. She liked to be loved. What woman does not? But she was one of those women who like to find in a lover a master rather than a slave. She felt that she was really rather fond of Ronald. She had never liked a man so much in so short a time before, but her ideal of a lover was a man who should come and compel her to love him; who should hold her will in his hand as a skilful rider holds a thorough-bred, apparently without effort, and who, while she was so madly in love with him as to be ready to sacrifice everything at his command, should himself remain perfectly calm, and show only enough feeling to let her know that the time would come when they should be all in all to each other. And here was a man worshipping at her shrine as if she were a deity—ready, no doubt, to lie prostrate before her, and permit her to drive a Juggernaut car of whims and fancies across his soul."

"It is very pleasant to be a goddess," she thought; "but the *rôle* of a woman would suit me better."

"I think we had better let the future take care of itself," she said, kindly. "You say you are happy now; let that suffice. Let us talk of something else. Is not that better?"

The waiter had brought coffee and Chartreuse. The diners were nearly all gone. The only other people remaining on their side of the balcony were putting on their coats and lighting cigars.

"You may smoke a cigarette if you like," said Lady Atherley; "I don't mind it at all."

Ronald generally smoked after dinner, but he feared that Lady Atherley might dislike the smell of the tobacco in the cab when they drove away, even if she did not object to it while he actually smoked, so he said, "Oh, no, thank you. I don't care about it."

Again a slight feeling of disappointment came over Constance. It was part of her creed that all manly

men smoked, and she had from long custom grown quite fond of the smell of tobacco; and although she never smoked herself, she liked Captain Greville, or anyone who dined with her, to light a cigarette after dinner.

She turned the conversation.

"I am so sorry, I hardly noticed your wife the other night," she said; "tell me about her. Is she pretty? Do you get on well together? Are you fond of her? Does she love you?"

"What a number of questions! I think her pretty, and I think most people would; she has a very good figure—rather slight perhaps, but nearly perfect."

"But if you admire that sort of figure, how you must hate mine! Don't you think me awfully stout?"

"How can you speak like that? In a picture or a statue I do admire a slight figure, but I hold with the Turks that a beauty of flesh and blood should be a fair weight for a camel's back."

"How horrid of you to compare me to a bale of cotton, or a sack of potatoes. I declare I could kill you for your odious simile."

"Well, you know, I think you can't have too much of a good thing; but, since my expression displeases you, I will use a more hackneyed one instead, and say that I love a little *embonpoint*—is that better?"

"Yes, yes; but how about your wife? you were going to tell me."

"We are the best of friends, we never quarrel; we are scarcely the least bit jealous of each other; not now, at least, for I was awfully jealous once, but that is long passed now, thank God—and for ever and ever, I hope."

"Then you evidently love each other very much?"

"Love! no; that is an old story, too, now. Ah, how I have longed that she could and would love me again! How I have striven to regain her affection! but it is gone for ever. Why, it is only since I have known you that I have been able to think of our past love—now so hopelessly turned into friendship—without pain."

Lady Atherley had been leaning over very close to Ronald, but she now drew herself up, and the expres-

sion of warm sympathy which had been constantly upon her face faded quickly away, and she looked at him coldly, almost disdainfully

"You must be very fond of her," she said.

"Yes, I like her, and honour her immensely. She is really awfully good, and I often think what a splendid wife she would have made to a better man."

"It is getting late," said Lady Atherley; "look, we are alone here, and the waiters are fidgetting to get us away, and besides, I daresay you are beginning to think it is a long time since you left your wife."

Every guest had left the restaurant; the waiters were clearing the adjoining tables with a good deal more noise than was absolutely necessary, and the one who had been specially attending upon Ronald was hovering about trying to make them feel that they ought to go. Ronald noticed the coldness of Lady Atherley's manner, and he felt how necessary it was to turn the conversation; so as he helped her on with her cloak, he said:

"But tell me something of yourself and your husband. Do you like him much?"

"What! Algernon? Oh, how I *hate* him! You don't know—you will probably never know with what good cause—but do you think I should be here with you if I liked him? If on my return home to-night I were to hear that he had left me and gone away with someone else, I think I should go mad with joy. But there is no chance of such a thing. No, he will be there to torture me till my dying day. I sold myself to him for wealth and position—yes, basely sold myself, and now I have my just reward; but poverty seemed so hideous, for I had always been taught to look upon it as such a bugbear, that the temptation was great, and now I suffer for it, but, oh, my God! how hard it is to bear."

Lady Atherley's eyes had filled with tears. She looked very pale, and Ronald longed to press her to his heart and kiss her tears away. The conversation about his wife had piqued her. Had he not bowed down to her as to a divinity? Then what right had he to set up his wife or any other woman as an idol beside her? She was not accustomed to analyze her feelings, and therefore when his question about her husband had turned her thoughts into another channel she had given

way to this burst of anger, and the cloud which had been gathering in her mind over Ronald had been dispersed in these few bitter sentences against her husband.

"What an idiot you must think me," she said with a smile, as she placed her hand on his arm and walked along the gallery. "I am so foolish, I ought to bear my chains with a better grace—but there now, I don't mean to think of anything unpleasant to-night."

CHAPTER XI.

A SEANCE MISSED.

"WHERE shall we go now?" asked Ronald, delighted at this sudden return of sunshine.

"Why, my dear boy, it is half-past nine o'clock, and I must get home as soon as possible. Will you drive home with me?"

"Of course, if I may."

They got into a hansom, and, as they drove off—"I can't bear to think that you suffer," said Ronald, taking her hand. She did not withdraw it.

"Thank you," she said; "I do so love sympathy. I think it really makes one's burdens lighter."

"If that is true, then you ought to find them lighter to-night, for I sympathize with you with all my heart, and I feel that I would give a year of my life to save you a moment's pain."

"Only our two selves. How delightful!" said Lady Atherley, leaning back, as she endeavored, gently now, to free her hand which Ronald still held.

The hansom was jolting along Holborn. The street looked dark, and though the window was up Ronald knew that no one could see them. He felt supremely happy, for Constance did not repulse him. She only said, faintly, "Don't do that; you really must not,"

and he thought that she must love him a little, or she would not have allowed it. Every now and again words seemed to rise to his lips, and then to fall back, unspoken, into his heart. As they were passing the Oxford Music Hall, she said :—

“ I should like to go and see that place some night, it must be great fun ; will you take me if I can get away some evening ? ”

He hardly paid any attention to her remark, for it was so delightful to sit with her beside him like that, but he said :—

“ You would not care for it—it is only vulgar, and I should not like you to go. It reeks of bad tobacco and beer, and there is really nothing amusing in it for you ; but, of course, if you want to go very much, I shall be glad to take you. If you put on a thick veil and keep the curtains of your box well drawn, no one will recognise you—at least unless there should be anyone there who loves you as madly as I do, for I believe I should know you anywhere now, and under any disguise.”

He was speaking on—not for the sake of what he was saying (for he hardly knew what he said), but he felt that as long as his voice was sounding in her ears she would let him sit as he was, and forget to draw herself away.

“ But I do so want to go,” she said. “ I have never seen a music-hall, and Algernon is so horrid ; he won’t take me himself, or let me go with anyone else. Now do promise to take me.”

“ I promise,” said Ronald.

“ By the way,” continued Lady Atherley, who was very anxious to continue the conversation, “ have you seen the new piece at the Opéra-Comique, when last you were in Paris ? Is it pretty ? ”

“ Yes, it is charming ; the music is admirably written. All Paris was there the first night.”

“ A few evenings ago a great discussion was raised between my sister and my brother-in-law on the subject of the masked ball at the opera in Paris. My brother-in-law maintained that it is impossible for a lady to go there.”

“ Well, you see, the company is decidedly—”

"Miscellaneous? Yes, I know that. But one finds that everywhere. You cannot imagine how I dislike society," continued Lady Atherley, who now suddenly passed to another subject, intent only upon keeping up the conversation. "Society chokes me. That is the effect the world has upon me. I must have fallen among serious young men, friends of my husband; young 'text-books' I call them. To the women I meet I can only talk of the last sermon they have heard, of the last piece of music they have been studying, or of the last dress they have worn."

"It is a craze. There is really no sense in it. . . ."

They came once more into Oxford Street, and as they passed by a lamp he saw her countenance radiant with smiles, her lovely lips partly open, and her eyes fairly dancing with merriment. She knew that the conversation was not interesting to her companion, that perhaps even it bored him, but being a thorough woman of the world, she knew that her only escape from his honeyed phrases, at the time, lay in her ability to keep her friend engaged in idle talk. She also to some extent enjoyed the discomfiture of the young man. Time and again he whispered tender words of undying love and devotion, but, with that peculiar tact which only women know how to use, she vouchsafed no answer, without at the time appearing rude, for she said to herself: "This is very wrong of me, but I suppose it does not matter just for this once; and I don't want to be cross to him, for he does love me so much. I will tell him of it in the afternoon when we meet coldly, and then he won't mind."

The cab was now entering the Regent Circus, and Ronald so far forgot himself as to seize her hand and, raising it to his lips, attempt to kiss it.

"Take care," she murmured hurriedly, "I may be recognised." But fortune favored them; they were not recognised.

Ronald felt really alarmed, and he blamed himself bitterly for having exposed Lady Atherley to so much danger.

"I hope to goodness no friend of yours was passing," he said anxiously. "How imprudent I am, darling! I shall never forgive myself if anyone saw us."

"Oh, don't talk of it," she answered, "it would be too awful. I can't think what possessed me to go out.

It is very wrong. Now, tell me honestly, don't you despise me awfully for it?"

"Despise you for it! No, my darling, I love you for it," and he attempted again to kiss her.

She pushed him away gently. "No," she said; "don't begin that again; you have done quite enough mischief for one day. Goodness only knows who may have seen me. Perhaps my character is compromised beyond all hope of recovery."

"Well, darling, I don't think you need really fear anything; for, you see, it is so improbable that Lady Atherley should be kissed by a man in a cab in Oxford Street, that if anyone said such a thing it would not be believed, and I should think that anyone seeing it would never suppose it was really you, but would put it down to a remarkable likeness. Then there is nothing in the least striking about your dress to-day, except, perhaps, that bunch of violets in your bonnet."

"I will burn them to-morrow."

And the next day the lovely new French bonnet was despoiled of its flowers, and they were ruthlessly flung upon the fire, though Ronald would willingly have bought them at fifty times their weight in gold to keep as a souvenir of that first delightful evening.

The cab was now turning into Grosvenor Square.

"I suppose I may not come in for a minute, so I had better say good-night here," said Ronald, sad to think that one of the happiest evenings in his life was over.

"Oh, you may come in for a little while if you like. That is, at least, if you—but no, I think, perhaps, you had better not."

"If I what? oh, do tell me—I so hate saying 'good-bye' yet, if there is any excuse for putting off the evil moment a little longer."

"Well, after what has happened just now, I don't think you ought to come in."

"If that is all, I will be as quiet as a lamb. I promise; won't you trust me?"

The cab had stopped at No. 55, and Ronald was handing Lady Atherley out of it. As she sprang lightly to the pavement, she said:—

"Very well, you may come in."

The butler, who had heard the hansom stop, had

already opened the door, and while he respectfully took Ronald's hat and stick Lady Atherley turned over the letters which the last post had brought in and said :—

“Light the candles in my boudoir, Weston.”

The butler, a prim, correct looking man of forty-five, with a pair of trim little whiskers and an otherwise closely shaven face, gave Ronald a searching glance from his piercing black eyes as he bowed low and hastened to obey his orders. He knew that the boudoir was reserved by Lady Atherley for her particular friends, and that except on ball nights Captain Greville was the only man who was ever shown into it, and here was a perfect stranger—so far as he knew—who had never been in the house before that day going to sit there with his mistress. He pondered over the matter, and determined to watch Macleod's behaviour. In a moment he returned to say that the candles were lighted, and Lady Atherley and her friend passed into the boudoir.

It was a lovely little room—more like the reception-room of some Parisian demi-mondaine than the sanctuary of an English lady. The walls were covered with light-blue flowered silk stretched in panels, each of which was surrounded by a border of maroon velvet. The ceiling, which had been painted blue, was covered with lace and muslin curtains drawn from the walls and caught up in the centre by a mirror, supported by little Watteau figures in silver. There were no paintings, but the mirror over the broad velvet-covered mantelpiece was framed in silver, with *étagères* of maroon velvet at each side of it supporting a collection of Sèvres and Dresden figures, and in the centre of each panel on the wall was a large trefoil of similar velvet, serving as a back-ground to groups of mythological figures, chiefly in Dresden china. In place of the window on the left hand, a small conservatory had been built, with a large circular basin in the centre, containing gold fish. Across the entrance to this conservatory, and across the door, were draped curtains of light blue satin. The carpet was of the same prevailing colour, with a Japanese pattern of japonicas climbing over a black trellis work. The chairs were covered in blue and silver, while an ebony and silver

cottage piano, a couple of small velvet tables, and a *marqueterie bonheur du jour*, inlaid with old Sèvres plaques, completed the furniture of the room.

Lady Atherley threw herself into a large arm-chair in front of the fire, while Ronald stood leaning on the mantelpiece. He was watching her intently, for she appeared to him incomparably more beautiful than ever before. One of her hands played feverishly with the fringe of the drapery round the chair; the other held a straw-coloured fan of ostrich-feathers, which rested on the folds of her dress. Beneath the drapery of this robe, her flexible and admirably modelled figure was discernible.

Two tiny feet, enclosed in slippers and silk stockings embroidered with gold, freed themselves from the long folds of her gown.

"You seem to be quite lost in some reverie," she said, holding languidly her fan between her face and the fire; "you were anxious to come in—was it only to stand there and dream?"

"I know it is rude of me to dream; you must forgive me, because my dream is so delicious that it would be absolute vandalism to destroy it."

"Oh, do let me hear it, if it is so charming as that."

"Well, I was dreaming that I had never before seen a woman as beautiful as you are to-night, and have been admiring those fairy-like feet. . . ."

"Oh, I know it is horrid of me," said Lady Atherley, starting up straight in her chair, and holding the fire screen in front of her ankles, "I have got into the most awful habit of lying back in chairs when I am with anyone who makes me feel quite at home, and then I always forget what a fearful exhibition I am making, but I will really try and be more decorous, and if you will tell me every time I daresay I shall learn to behave better before long."

"Now, I said you were not to be angry with me if I told you, and I am sure it is punishment enough for me that you give me the peacock's feathers to look at instead of something much prettier without being sarcastic as well."

"Don't you know that you are talking sacrilege, an

that peacock's feathers are quite the most utterly intense of all the lovely decorations of which the highest art takes cognizance?" asked Lady Atherley, putting her head slightly on one side and gazing at the fire-screen with a look of mock admiration, while she sank into the quaint attitude of one of Mr. Burne Jones's mediæval damosels. The effect which her modern Parisian costume produced in this attitude was very funny.

"I don't understand high art, for I am not in the least æsthetic," laughed Ronald. "But I do know that the most utterly intense and lovely thing I want to see is Lady Constance Ida Atherley."

He bent over her suddenly and kissed her before she could answer.

"Mr. Macleod," she said, half angrily, "I thought you promised that if I let you come in you would behave properly."

"Then you know my second name, too," she said, after a short pause; "do you like it?"

"Yes, it has always been my favourite name, and I like it much better than Constance. Do many people call you by it?"

"No, I don't think anyone ever did. I am generally called Constance or Connie."

"Oh, I hate that last abbreviation—may I call you Ida? I shall love to think that I have a name for you all to myself."

"I think the only way you have any right to address me is as 'Lady Atherley,'" she said, rising from her chair, and looking at him with so much haughtiness that for an instant he thought she was in earnest.

"*Tiens, mon ami,*" she said, laying her hand on his shoulder and looking full into his eyes, while her stern expression melted into a smile, "it is only my nonsense. I like to tease you a little; but you may call me exactly what you like."

The events of that day had been too much for Ronald—the excitement of the visit in the afternoon—the long weary waiting at the station—the sudden revulsion of feeling which he had experienced when she had at last driven up—the happiness he had enjoyed at the Holborn Restaurant—the madness of

the drive home in the hansom—the sudden changes in Lady Atherley's manner—had all wrought together upon him, and he now felt that he had lost all control over himself. Seizing her round the shoulders, he pressed her to him in a mad embrace.

Vainly she struggled to free herself from him, for he held her with the firmness of a vise. An inward struggle ensued. Should he speak, or should he let her depart? His reserve and timidity at first counselled him to be silent. But, though one's character is generally stronger than one's feelings, love impetuously forced its way through his indecision, and he felt he was bound to have the courage and satisfaction of confessing all to the woman he adored.

In a moment she seemed to grow too weak even to speak.

"My darling Ida," he murmured, "I love you, oh, how I love you!"

She made no answer—she had almost fainted. She had not the strength to push him away.

"Oh, my darling, darling, I will follow you to the end of the world, I will give up everything for you."

"No, no, Ronald, do not speak thus," she answered.

Suddenly the blood rushed back from her heart, she could feel it surging at her temples as though the veins would burst, and the pallor of her face gave way to a crimson flush. She sprang to her feet. In a moment she seemed to realize the degradation of being thus at the mercy of a man whom she scarcely knew—a man whom she did not love. Did she not almost hate him as he knelt there at her feet? And yet in that moment of strength her weakness returned upon her. The events of that day had not left her unmoved.

"Leave me," she said, in a low, deep voice which penetrated his soul—"Leave me. Enough of this degradation. I am powerless now, but I will never see you again, and know that hereafter if ever I think of you it will be with feelings of the deepest hatred"—and she sank into the arm-chair once again.

With an immense effort Ronald overcame his feelings. For an instant he stood there watching her; how lovely she looked as she lay there uneasy and bashful, with her oppressed and agitated breathing! A lock of hair had fallen across her forehead. Had he known that a file of

soldiers was waiting outside to lead him to instant execution, he would have followed up his suit; but to live afterwards and become an object of hatred to her—never!

“No,” he said, with a voice which trembled in spite of his efforts to keep calm, “I love you with all the strength of my soul. I do not belong to the class of licentious intriguers who outwardly affect an exaggerated puritanism. Even if the cup of happiness were held to my lips, I would fling it from me untasted rather than run the risk of losing for ever that love which I would give all else in life to win. I swear to you by that which I hold dearest in the world—by your own sweet self—that when I came here I had no thought of this—no thought of offending you. Forgive me,” and he made a step towards her, but she shrank from him.

“Oh, don’t begin again,” she said, “for God’s sake go now, I cannot bear it.”

“You still fear me,” he said. “Look at me, Ida, I am calm now, and you are as safe with me as if I were a statue instead of a man, and I tell you now that if ever I have the intense delight of calling you mine, it shall not be in a moment of passion like this, for if you do not love me freely and without reservation of any kind, I shall never become yours in any other way.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. The effort he had made to regain his self-control had blanched his cheeks, but his eyes were large and lustrous—she saw that he was once more master of himself, and she felt all a woman’s admiration for the strong will which had been able in a moment to subdue his over-wrought feelings.

“Ronald,” she said, holding out her hand to him frankly, with a look of unfeigned admiration, “you are generous, you are noble. I had thought that my fancy for you would pass away quickly and give way to indifference upon a nearer acquaintance, but now I feel—and I frankly confess it to you—that if you are really the man I believe you to be at this moment I shall learn to love you with all my heart and with all my soul. I have been weak, and you have generously respected my woman’s weakness. I am grateful to you now, and

I know how much more deeply I shall feel your generosity when I think over the events of this night hereafter. Go now, and may our next meeting be not far distant."

He held her hand, but he felt that, after what she had said, it would be mean of him to kiss her again.

"And may I hope, then?" he asked.

"Be patient," she answered; "to those who can wait all things are possible."

At this half-promise his face brightened.

"Thanks," he murmured, "a thousand thanks."

As he hesitated a moment before saying good-night, a thought struck her.

"And our spiritual *séance*?"

"It has been the most successful I ever attended," he answered. "May I hope for another before long?"

"*A bientôt*," she said, as he left the room.

The butler, who had heard the door open, came forward to let him out. Ronald noticed how narrowly the man watched him.

"Can you fetch me a cab?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir;" and in a few minutes a cab stood at the door.

Ronald slipped a sovereign into the man's hand. From that moment the butler abandoned the resolution he had made of watching the new visitor, and determined that henceforth he would be perfectly blind whenever that gentleman happened to call.

Unconscious of the chill night air Ronald sat back in the hansom, and as the wheels rattled over the stones they seemed to play a joyous tune, of which the ever recurring refrain was "She loves me—she loves me!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCERNING CLOTHES.

THE next morning, as Macleod walked to his office, pondering over the events of the previous evening, it suddenly struck him that his boots were very badly made. This discovery led him to several others, and by the time he was sitting at his desk he had come to the conclusion that his collar was of an unfashionable shape, that his clothes were badly cut, and that it was time he had a new hat. In short, for the first time since he married he began to feel that he was badly dressed, and that he must for Lady Atherley's sake make a change in his personal appearance. But though it was easy enough to have his hair cut short, to substitute a stick-up for a turn-down collar, and to put on a black silk scarf with a gold pin in it instead of the old-fashioned bow he had been accustomed to wear, he felt that in the matter of getting a well-cut coat, neat boots, and the correct style of hat, he would be unable to proceed upon his own unaided judgment. He might have recourse to Fausterley, who had often chaffed him about his indifference to dress; but though the young barrister was always careful to appear with a new-looking hat and clothes of the latest cut, his taste led him to go before the fashion rather than to follow it; and Ronald laughed as he pictured himself dressed according to his friend's pattern. But while he was deliberating as to whom it would be best to consult, one of the clerks brought him a letter to sign.

This clerk, a Mr. Barbour, was the very man for Ronald's purpose. He was about Ronald's own age, and they had both entered the firm about the same time; but though they had been so many years together they had never become intimate, for Ronald looked upon him as a good-natured bore, whose company was almost intolerable. Mr. Barbour had but one

ambition—one idea in life—to be taken for a cavalry officer. His chief care was to conceal the fact that he was a clerk in the city.

Nor had Mr. Barbour been unsuccessful in the great ambition of his life. He had joined the volunteers, and giving great attention to his drill he had acquired a more thorough knowledge of matters of military detail than many an officer in the regular army could boast of. And by dint of constantly talking about his corps, which he always called his regiment, he had often succeeded in impressing young ladies at dances with the idea that he was in the service—an idea which was further strengthened by the heaviness of his moustache and a peculiarity of gait which he had acquired by walking about for hours in his bedroom with a large pair of spurs on his feet and a cavalry sword by his side. In fact, so thoroughly had he learnt his part, that crossing sweepers and shoe blacks were always deceived by his appearance and addressed him as "Captain."

Of course, with him dress was a matter of deep and continual study. Every day, after his work was over, he would dawdle for an hour in the park, and, having learned to know several Guardsmen and celebrities of the *grand monde* by sight, he noted with the greatest care every detail of their dress, so that when any new fashion came in he was able to follow it before it became general; and his tailor, to whom he spoke familiarly of Lord A. of the Guards, Captain B. of the Blues, etc., etc., had become impressed with the idea that he was, if not in the Guards himself, at least a great friend of many of the officers, and consequently a man to be treated with the greatest consideration.

To this man, then, Ronald turned for advice. A few days ago he would never have thought of asking his opinion upon any subject, least of all upon a matter of this kind, for he knew that Barbour would be sure to tell the other fellows how Macleod had had to come to him to learn how to dress. When Ronald had been defeated at Sandborough, Barbour's first thought had been one of delight that the man who had been below him in the office, and who as a partner had now risen above him, should not have attained a position so

far above any which he could ever hope to fill; but afterwards he had often regretted his defeat, for after all it would have been pleasant to talk to his partners at dances about "my friend, the member for Sandborough."

But though Ronald knew that it was probable he might be laying up a perfect garner of chaff for himself, he felt that anything his companions might say could affect him very little in his present happy frame of mind; so without any circumlocution, he plunged at once into the thick of the subject.

"Do you know," he began, standing up and pulling his coat in at the waist, "that I am getting very dissatisfied with my tailor. Don't you think this coat is very badly cut?"

"Atrociously, my dear fellow," answered Barbour, who could not tell what to make of Ronald's question, and looked round to see if there was anyone within hearing to laugh with.

"Well, the fact is," said Ronald, "that I leave everything to my tailors, and I think they must be very bad, for they never seem to turn out a decent coat."

"Well I shouldn't have said anything unless you had asked me," answered Barbour, grinning inordinately, "but your dress is absolutely a crime. I declare your tailor ought to be shot, but then why don't you change him?"

"Ah, that's the difficulty, you see. I don't know where to go. If I went to Savile's he would not take the trouble to dress me properly, so that I should only pay a higher price and be no better off than I am now, for I should not be able to tell him what I wanted. And then, you know," continued Ronald, smiling, "I haven't your figure."

"Oh, that's nothing," said Barbour, immensely delighted with the compliment; "a good tailor can soon put right any little thing of that kind. My man would make you look a thousand per cent. better if you care to give him a trial."

"I should be very glad to, but I didn't like to trouble you about it. When you go to him next, would you mind taking me with you?"

"Delighted. I am going to-day."

When they reached the tailor's, an unpretending-looking shop in Conduit Street, Barbour introduced Ronald as a friend, to whom the greatest attention must be shown; then, looking at some cloth which was lying on the table, he said:

"Very pretty, that; but you must show us something a little quieter, Mr. Dortheim—that is hardly suitable for a statesman."

The tailor, wondering whether Ronald might be one of the new Ministry, was most profuse in his attention. Ronald left the choice of everything to his colleague, and the result was that he got a really well-fitting and stylish-looking suit, and after Barbour had taken him to a hatter and a bootmaker he looked five years younger and almost a dandy.

When the clothes came home Mrs. Macleod could not understand the change.

"What have you done to yourself?" she asked, when she saw Ronald starting for the city in his new war paint. "I declare you look quite respectable, and I shan't be ashamed to take you with me to the park. What does it mean?"

"Oh, I've tried a new tailor," said Ronald, carelessly, but half fearing that she would guess there must be some cause for so radical a change.

"Well, I'm sure it was time," she answered; "will you meet me somewhere and pay some visits to-day?"

But Ronald had planned that he would call on Lady Atherley, whom he had not seen since the night of the interview at the Holborn Restaurant. So he excused himself on the plea that he could not get away till too late.

Ella said nothing, but she thought, "It is always the same. He can never come when I want him, but thank goodness, Charlie is generally disengaged." She sent off a telegram to Fausterley to be ready, and she would call for him at his chambers and take him for a drive.

"I can't think what has happened to Ronald," she said, when a few hours later they were driving down Regent Street together. "He is dressed absolutely like a gentleman, and I don't remember such a thing before for years. Isn't it mysterious?"

"Well, I think I can clear up the mystery—Ronald is in love."

"Oh, nonsense, he isn't that sort of man at all; he likes fooling about with women, I know, but his are only silly flirtations, and he is much too indifferent ever to fall in love; I wish he would, I think I should respect him more."

"Well, then, you have your wish, for he is really thoroughly gone on Lady Atherley. I never saw a more downright case in my life." And Fausterley proceeded to give a full description of all the unmistakable signs which he had observed in his friend during the last few days.

"Isn't it glorious?" he added—when he had told her all about it—"it will take his mind off his defeat, and besides, it will keep him from bothering us and being jealous."

"Well, that is a blessing."

Mrs. Macleod's first sensation on hearing this intelligence was one of relief. She had often vaguely wished Ronald would take a fancy to some one, for she thought she knew him well enough to be certain that it could never be serious, and that consequently, while he would gain an interest in life, his nature was such that there was little fear of his being guilty of any of the follies which men commit when they fall in love after their youth has passed away. But still, though she had looked forward with something like pleasure to the idea of his taking some fancy which would make him more cheerful in himself and less observant of her, yet, when she heard that her half-wish had come true, the intelligence left her thoughtful and for a few minutes silent. Charlie Fausterley observed her closely. Could he have been deceived in her? Was it possible that, after all, she had some remains of tender feeling for Ronald. He had always believed that the friendship of the husband and wife had become so thoroughly Platonic that either of them might have heard of any infidelity of the other with the most perfect *sang froid*—in the same way that one of two friends would hear of some piece of extravagance committed by the other, as a circumstance to be regretted, perhaps, but not to be grieved over.

"I don't believe it," said Ella.

"But I assure you there is not the slightest doubt about it," answered Fausterley, rather piqued at her flat rejection of his information. Intent upon convincing her that he was right, he multiplied proofs and circumstances, repeating what Ronald had said to him about his new flame—describing his excitement before the first visit, and painting the rapture with which Ronald had come to him the day after the dinner at the Holborn, and confided to him the successful progress of his suit. Then Ella remembered that it was true he had dined out on that particular night, and the thought flashed across her, "Perhaps it is true after all."

What was it that made her turn from this thought with dislike? Was it that any of the old love for him still nestled in some far corner of her heart? No. For how could she care for any man who did not make her his divinity—his only queen. Was she a woman to share the pedestal upon which her husband had placed her with any Lady Atherley who crossed his path? Never. But still she would like to know if it was true. Suddenly she turned almost angrily upon Fausterley and said, "Do you know that it is a very mean *rôle* which you are playing—repeating to me the secrets which my husband has confided to you. I am glad there is nothing between us, or perhaps you might return confidence for confidence."

Fausterley's face flushed crimson. He set his teeth firmly and drew his lips back till they turned white.

"You are no doubt right," he said, in a voice which he forced himself to keep calm, "and I am not a fit companion for you," and he leant forward to tell the coachman to stop.

"Stop at the first music shop," said Mrs. Macleod, with great presence of mind, aware that if Fausterley left the carriage abruptly, looking as angry as he did, the matter would certainly be discussed in the servants' hall.

As the carriage pulled up at the shop door Mrs. Macleod said "Buy me a song and forgive me," and looking into his eyes she saw that his momentary anger was passing away.

"I spoke thoughtlessly," she said, as they once more entered the carriage, "only your communication took me so much by surprise, and Ronald is so unlikely to have any strong fancy for anyone. I don't believe he is capable of loving anybody."

"I don't know how capable he may be," answered Fausterley, still rather ruffled, "but this I do know, that if he is proof against the disease he has all the outward symptoms of a very serious attack."

"Well, you shall give me proofs."

"No. That would evidently be distasteful to you."

"Don't be a goose. I tell you you shall give me proofs, and if you think I care—well, but really what fun it is to think of grave old Ronald. I can't believe it. It must be rather dull for Lady Atherley, too. But I can't see much to admire in her, though, can you?" And so Mrs. Macleod rattled on in half-finished sentences, suddenly seized with a wild gaiety—laughing at everything, teasing Fausterley, and, in fact, making herself more charming than ever. Therefore, when the drive was over he pressed her hand more tenderly than usual, and said in a low tone which only just reached her ear, "And to think that a man could leave you for any woman in the world."

"And could you then be so very faithful?"

"I wish I might have the happiness to be tried."

"But suppose you were to meet Lady Atherley afterwards; how could you keep your faith?"

"Lady Atherley? Oh!"

"Well, good-bye; we must not put you to so rude a trial."

Fausterley walked away musing. The scene which had just taken place between him and Ella gave him food for deep reflection. One thing was certain to him now. Lightly as their marriage tie sat upon his friends, that tie could not be broken without a pang. It seemed incomprehensible to him that they should feel any pain at parting, and yet, after what Mrs. Macleod had said, it was evident to him that if a rupture should ever come she, at least, would not bear it with indifference, whatever Ronald might think or feel—plunged as he was in the delirium of his new passion.

And he himself—Ronald's friend—what was he doing? But, no; there could not be any real sorrow about a parting between the Macleods, and he went over in his mind his parting with his former loves. There was his first love when he was about sixteen, for Madame de Monribeau—a fashionable French woman who had made an idol of him for six weeks, and then dropped him for the banker's clerk who came once a month to inform her how her account stood. He had felt that—for a few weeks, it is true, but then he was such a boy at that time, and he might be expected to have some absurdly sentimental feelings—this would never be the case with people so old as the Macleods. Then there was Polly Hunter—a laughing, sunny, light-hearted girl, who had brightened his existence for nearly two years, and shared all his troubles and sorrows, and was as nearly perfect as a woman could be—although she had developed too strong a taste for jewellery and champagne. Well, when she allowed Colonel Smithers to buy her that diamond ring which she could not afford, and he got angry about it and sent her away—he had had a couple of dull evenings, it is true, but when he afterwards met her on the Derby day on Mr. Thornthwaite's drag in her black and crimson satin dress and sparkling with diamonds he did not feel the least uncomfortable. He remembered quite well with what mock gravity he had raised his hat to her and asked, "Miss Hunter, I believe?" and with what a comical look of alarm she had placed her finger on her lips, and said, "No, Mr. Fausterley; can you have forgotten my name? I am Miss Mabel de Huntingtower." And then he had drank her health in a bumper of Heidsieck with a heart all the lighter for the thought that she had everything she wanted, and that he had not to bear the expense out of his scanty means, as he had been obliged to last year.

Then why should he scruple to take Ella away from a man who did not appreciate her, even though that man did unfortunately happen to be his friend? But though he argued thus with himself he was not comfortable. Suddenly he stopped in his walk. "She was right," he said, half aloud, while a shadow seemed

to pass over his brow, and his face grew stern and hard. "Let me at least be honest with myself. The part I am playing with Ronald is that of a mean and despicable blackguard. But I cannot turn back, for I love her. Fate is to blame, not I. Fate, that made her this man's wife. Fate, that has bound together two uncongenial souls. Oh, if it had only been otherwise. Had she still been free, how I could have worshipped her—how she might have raised me above everything that is low and mean. Then I could have led her forth as my wife in the light of day, with no one to cast a word of reproach at her or at me; but now the only path to her lies through the slime of false friendship and broken marriage vows. It is too late now, and though I had to pass through all the slime and filth in this great city to reach her, I can not and will not conceal my love for her."

While this train of thought was finding expression upon Fausterley's lips, Mrs. Macleod was thinking no less earnestly about the communication which he had so lately made to her. She usually devoted to her children the half-hour or so which elapsed between her return from her drive and the ringing of the dressing-bell.

Fausterley had lately brought them a fairy story in which they were deeply interested, and Mrs. Macleod was reading it aloud to them. The day before, when the dressing bell rang, they had left Prince Amabilis utterly exhausted by a six hours' combat with two fierce dragons, at the moment when his good sword "Fendpierre," rusted by the venom which his assailants had spat upon it, broke off short in his hands. The children, who would have considered it unfair to read a word further without their mother, had been anxiously waiting for her; and, therefore, the moment she came in they rushed up to her with the book, but she was in no humour for reading.

"Lily can read aloud and I'll listen," she said,—taking some work out of a little bag on the table and pretending to occupy herself with it,—"as I want to finish this to-day." But her hands played idly with the silks and her thoughts were far away while the

little girl read on in a monotonous voice of the difficulties of Prince Amabilis.

"I wonder what he can see to admire in a great big woman like that Lady Atherley," thought Ella; "now if he had taken a fancy to that pretty little Mrs. Powell, I feel I shouldn't have minded, but I suppose all men are little better than brutes. They like a woman because she is big and voluptuous-looking—they seem to think quantity not quality is the great aim to be attained."

"At this moment Prince Amabilis thrust his hand into his bosom for the talisman which Princess Holdherz had given him, but to his dismay he remembered that the lovely fairy of the crooked ways had coaxed him to lend it to her, and that he had forgotten to get it back; so the dragon Fauxamy seizing his wrists, and the dragon Luxeffreney clutching his ankles, they bore him with great rapidity across the sea." So read Lily. Her eyes opened at their widest, stopping for a moment to ask, "Isn't it dreadful, mamma?" but not waiting for an answer.

"He shouldn't have given up the talisman to that horrid fairy," said Mrs. Macleod, who had caught the last few sentences.

"And yet I could show him that some men are capable of loving one woman and sticking to her," she thought, continuing the train of her reflections, and letting the dragons fly off with the Prince unheeded.

And then she spent some minutes in that most dangerous of occupations for a wife—comparing her husband and her friend. There was Fausterley, always attentive, always kind and considerate, always making her feel that with him she was unmistakably, pre-eminently the first of womankind; whereas, on the other hand, her husband was so often indifferent, sometimes unkind, always more polite and deferential to other women than to her, and in this comparison she forgot that the usages of society compelled him to be more attentive to strangers than to her. That she would have been disgusted, if he had done anything before people which could have been interpreted into that most odious of all qualities—uxoriousness; and that she was always bored if he wanted to draw her on to his knee, or put

his arms round her and kiss her when they were alone. And so her thoughts ran on, until, when the dressing-bell rang, and the children, closing the book with regret, had scampered off to the nursery, she said with a sigh:—

“Ah, how different it might have been if I had met Charlie first.”

“What will you wear to-night, ma’am?” asked the maid, standing with the door of the wardrobe open in her hand.

“My dark green velvet, I think.”

“It’s getting very shabby, ma’am, and master said he hated it last time you wore it.”

“Never mind, we shall be quite alone to-night, and I must wear it out,” answered Mrs. Macleod; never thinking that if Lady Atherley were going to dine with Ronald she would be sure not to wear a worn-out dress—least of all a dress which she knew he disliked—though she did realise the fact that if Charlie had been likely to come in after dinner she would have chosen something fresher looking.

CHAPTER XIII.

MORNING REFLECTIONS.

WHEN Lady Atherley awoke on the morning after the spiritual *séance*, which ought to have been described in the eleventh chapter of this story, and which would inevitably have been found there if she and Ronald had not managed to sit so late over their dinner at the “Holborn,” she was suffering from a slight headache, which caused her to look round the room and mutter—as she stretched forth her well-rounded white arm and rang the bell for her morning coffee—“What a brute he is!” This uncomplimentary epithet, which invariably arose to her lips whenever she happened to awake with any bodily or mental ailment, was

intended for her husband, who, allowing her immense liberty in many things concerning which most husbands are very particular, was yet a perfect tyrant in the matter of furnishing and decorating their connubial chamber. This room offered a strange contrast to the rest of the apartments in the house. It was large and lofty, but appeared singularly plain and bare. In the centre of it stood two narrow beds, from which every vestige of curtain had been ruthlessly banished. The walls were painted a dull cream colour, and were totally devoid of pictures. The carpet was of a dull, patternless red, and seemed to have been chosen on account of its ugliness. The only articles in the room which bore any testimony to the wealth of its occupants were the toilet table and full length cheval glass of inlaid ivory, and the handsome set of gold, crystal, and ivory toilet requisites. Why Sir Algernon insisted on this absence of ornament (or of decent comfort, as Lady Atherley called it), no one knew. When he was in a good humour he told her it was, as a contrast, to show off her beauty, as a gem of art is sometimes set in a plain black frame. At other times he said it was because it pleased him, and that was enough. At any rate, Lady Atherley always found in this whim of her husband's a full explanation of any headache or other ill which might fall upon her, and a never-failing pretext for abusing him and justifying herself in any little fault which she might commit.

She had tried hard to induce him to let her have a room of her own, but this he had resisted utterly.

Wasting but very few moments in reflecting on the well-worn subject of her husband's brutality, Lady Atherley soon passed to the pleasanter theme of her last night's adventures. Her first thought of Ronald was "How noble he is—and how strong." But this was followed immediately by another and less agreeable one, "He was stronger than I, and he has the right to despise me." Then she regretted everything and felt that she would rather he had been different. How? Well, any way; yes, even if he had not been so strong; and from that time, though she felt that if he had taken advantage of her weakness she would have hated him, still with a want of logic which she could not have

justified if she had tried, she could not forgive him for having allowed her to escape. Then as she lay there sipping her coffee she passed over in her mind several things which he had said to her. How foolish of him, for instance, to have spoken as he did about his wife; what did she want to know about his love for her? The idea of a man professing to love a woman and then maundering on about his bygone affection for his wife, telling her in fact, in so many words, "If my wife would only have loved me I should have been true to her, and then your attractions, great as I must own they are" (for he does certainly admire me) "would have been powerless to draw me away from her; but as she has willed it otherwise, and thrown my affection aside, I come and honour you with an offer of her leavings."

"No," thought Lady Atherley, "I am not to be won like that; and to think that this man held me in his power!" Then with a look of supreme scorn in her eyes she flung the coffee cup which she held in her hand violently on the floor. As it broke into fragments she was recalled to herself; and when her maid who had heard the noise came in, she said calmly, "I have dropped the cup, Brooks, but there's no chance of spoiling anything in this horrid room. I'll get up now."

Then while Brooks placed her dress in readiness for her, and swept away the fragments of broken china, Lady Atherley lay back with her eyes closed. She felt warm and comfortable now, and she pondered again over the events of the preceding night. She thought of all Ronald's words, and then her indignation faded away. "There is something awfully nice about him, too; how bright his eyes were; how endearing his words. I wonder how he could have been so—so good? But I'm glad he was—yes, awfully glad; and yet I wonder if I should really have hated him: but this is folly," and leaving her bed she cast these thoughts from her.

After lunch she took up a novel and began to take an interest in the story. She looked at the clock—half-past four.

"I suppose Mr. Macleod will be calling here in about half-an-hour, and I shall have to put this book away."

But an hour passed, and he had not appeared. Lady Atherley, who had determined to treat him rather coldly, felt almost angry with him for not coming earlier. She rang the bell.

"Order the brougham round at once, and if anyone calls before it is here, I am not at home; you can say I am just gone out," she added, thinking that she would make Ronald regret his being late.

But he, too, had pondered over the events of the previous evening, and he had come to the conclusion that cost him what it might he would not call for a few days. And so it happened that Lady Atherley had full time to dress and drive off in her carriage at her leisure; for though other visitors came before she started, she saw that Ronald's card was not among those lying on the Hall table.

She drove to Mrs. Heathermount's, and found her at home. After talking for half an hour upon politics and dress, Lady Atherley turned the conversation on the party of the other evening.

"I was so glad to see Count de Boisvillon again," she said.

"Really—well, he complains that you treated him very badly, that you would hardly speak to him, and that you had not a word for anyone but Mr. Macleod."

"Oh, yes; I did get on very well with Mr. Macleod. He is so clever, he seems to talk so well on art or literature and all that sort of thing, and I do like a man who can talk like a rational creature, instead of supposing that every woman wants to be made a fool of."

"Yes, he is a very nice fellow; but I was rather afraid you might find him a little dull. However, he evidently enjoyed his evening very much, and he seems most anxious to meet you again; indeed, he almost had his wish, for he only left the house about five minutes before you came."

Lady Atherley rose to go. Then Macleod was not ill or detained upon business, and yet he had not come to see her, and after such a scene too.

Ronald held out four days without calling, during which Lady Atherley's feelings with regard to him

changed often. At first she was angry and determined to punish him by being very disagreeable to him. But on the third day it suddenly flashed upon her, "He despises me."

The thought was maddening, for he might never come again. At all hazards she must see him again, and remove any bad impression which might remain on his mind, so she took up a pen and wrote :

"DEAR MR. MACLEOD,—To-morrow afternoon I have to go into the City, and expect to leave it at about half-past four. I shall be in the Charing Cross waiting room for a few minutes about five o'clock. Perhaps you would like to see me for a moment.

"Yours sincerely,

"IDA A."

She felt sure he would come, and of course he went. She kept him waiting again, by calculation this time, not by carelessness, for she thought, firstly, that he might be late and that it would be intolerable to have to wait for him, and secondly, that one appreciates better anything one has become impatient about, provided, of course, that the impatience has not had time to wear out one's temper. She timed her movements, therefore, so as to arrive at the rendezvous about half an hour late.

Ronald—prepared by the fearful hour he had passed in that place a few days before—walked about the station with tolerable calmness, and he was only beginning to get uneasy when Lady Atherley's carriage drove up. He stood back in the shadow of the door so that the servants might not see him.

"I am so sorry to see I am late again," said Lady Atherley, with one of her sweetest smiles. "Do tell me if you have been hating me all this time, and vowing that you will never meet me anywhere again?"

"No, I hardly began to notice you were late; this is nothing to the time I had to wait for you when we last met here," said Ronald, naïvely.

"Now I know you are cross, or you would not remind me of my past sins, and make me feel that I am not worth waiting for."

"Oh, Ida, you know I would wait for you any time without a murmur, if I only knew you would come at last."

Ronald's love was so visible in his eyes as he said this that she looked round in alarm lest anyone should notice them. But they were unobserved, and an expression of triumph passed over her face. He did not despise her, then.

"When I think of you and know that I am going to meet you," he continued, "I seem to rise far above this world and to be walking in the clouds with the glorious blue of heaven above me; but when you leave me waiting, scarcely daring to hope that you will really give me the great delight of seeing you, then I have leisure to look down and see that clouds are a very unsubstantial footpath, and I shudder as I see the fearful rocks of despair which await me below the moment the hope of possessing you shall cease to sustain me."

She did not answer, but pressed his hand for an instant.

"We must not wait here," she said, "it is so public."

"Let us go somewhere, then."

"No, my servants would see me leave the station, and that would not do."

Ronald urged that they might walk out by Villiers Street and John Street, Adelphi, but he could think of no place to which he would care to take Lady Atherley, and she shook her head at the idea of going into some confectioner's.

"It is tiresome," she said, "for I cannot stay here any longer, and I should have liked a chat with you. If you had only been a barrister I might have come to consult you upon some point or other in your chambers, but as you are not you had better let me give you a drive. Where shall we drive to?" she asked.

"Anywhere; in the park if you like."

"My dear boy, I don't mind your being seen in my carriage if we chance to meet anyone I know, but at the same time I am not anxious to publish to the world the fact that Mr. Macleod is my devoted admirer."

"When I am with you I am quite mad. I can think of nothing but my love for you, and I seem to lose any little caution I was ever possessed of. But,

stop, I have an idea. Do you know anyone at Chelsea?"

"Yes; I know Carlyle, but only very slightly."

"Good. I have always loved him in 'Sartor Resartus,' and venerated him for his 'Frederick,' but I little thought he would be useful to me to-day. We can have a quiet drive all along the embankment, and then, when you have left a card upon him, what more natural than to take a drive in Battersea Park until it is time for you to return home?"

They entered the carriage.

Lady Atherley, satisfied that Ronald did not in any way think the less of her for her conduct, was in a charming mood. Still some evil genius seemed to possess Ronald. With an utter want of tact he always seemed to turn the conversation upon topics which were distasteful to his companion. At last he found himself questioning her upon her past life.

"What has happened to you to-day?" she asked, as she fixed her large eyes steadily upon him, while a slight quiver of her lip showed that she was displeased. "Has any one been telling you stories to my prejudice?"

"No, I have heard nothing against you, nor should I love you less if a thousand crimes were laid to your charge, for I cannot help it. I feel that I should so much like you to tell me that you had never loved any man before, or, at least that—that—you had never made any man completely happy."

She met his inquiring gaze with a look of calm defiance.

"My past is mine," she said, coldly; "and it in no way concerns you. It would be easy for me to tell you pleasantly that you were the first man who had ever found the way to my heart, but I should scorn to tell you such a thing, because it would be unworthy of me, because it would imply that I had passed unspotted through the temptations of this world, which would be untrue; and doubly unworthy of me, because it would imply that I loved you, which I do not."

These words cut Ronald to the heart, and he was silent.

"I am justly punished for my presumption," he said,

after a few moments. "Forgive me, my darling; let the past be forgotten. You are right in saying that it concerns me not. What you say of the present is harder still, for I had begun to hope that you did love me a little; but, at least, you have not said anything terrible with regard to the future."

The carriage had stopped at Cheyne Walk, and the footman, having taken up Sir Algernon's and Lady Atherley's cards, was waiting for further orders. "Home," said Lady Atherley, and in obedience to her orders the carriage was turned round and the horses were started at a brisk pace.

"And is that your answer to my question about the future?" asked Ronald, who had looked forward to at least half an hour's drive in Battersea Park. He was very pale, and he felt he could almost have bitten his tongue out for having asked her such unjustifiable questions.

She saw his trouble, and her anger vanished.

"Oh, the future," she said, smiling, "who can tell? "I am no astrologer to tell what the future may bring forth, but I believe that the man who keeps some object steadily in view, and who can wait patiently for it, will——"

"Be happy at last," broke in Ronald, with a look of intense gratitude.

"I did not say that. I was only going to say, 'will attain his end.'"

"Well, that is exactly the same thing in my case."

Though the conversation now became pleasanter, Ronald, taking warning by his former mistakes, took the first opportunity of leaving Lady Atherley, now that her equanimity had been restored, thanking her for her implied forgiveness, and promising faithfully not to behave so idiotically again.

That evening Fausterley came to dine with the Macleods, and Ronald confided to him how tactless he had been.

"You ask me to be your counsel in this love affair of yours," said the young barrister, laughing; "and I feel quite important at the idea of being called upon to give advice upon any subject whatever—but I'm hanged if I don't chuck up your brief altogether if you go on like

this—and then what a ridiculous thing, meeting a woman who is so well known in society, at a public place like a railway station, and driving about in an open carriage. I think you must either be mad or anxious to *afficher* your new love.”

“Ah, yes, but what can I do? How lucky you are to have chambers, where a fair client can come and consult you upon business.”

“The only fair clients that usually consult barristers are solicitors, and I for my part should rather see a good many of them than one of the opposite sex; but if it is only chambers that you want you can get them without being called to the Bar.”

“Of course, I never thought of that,” said Ronald, delighted with the idea; and before the two friends went up to the drawing-room it had been arranged that Fausterley should find out some comfortably furnished rooms in a quiet neighbourhood, take them for a couple of friends who were coming up from the country, pay the first week’s rent in advance, and bring Ronald the latch key.

Before Fausterley left he managed to find an opportunity of reporting the whole scheme to Mrs. Macleod.

“It looks as if he were very much smitten,” said Ella, “but I don’t want to know any more about it; I am sick of the whole subject.”

That night Ella felt almost like a criminal as she lay down beside Ronald. She was on the point of warning him that he was watched, and that his every movement would be reported to her, but she thought she would sound him first and see if he would on his side be willing to make a confession.

“I wonder you never go in for a flirtation now, as you used to,” she said.

“I am getting too old; after a certain age these things pall upon one.”

“And yet I fancied you got on with Lady Atherley at the Heathermounts’ pretty well.”

“Yes, she was very agreeable. I hope we shall meet them again; they would be very nice people to know.”

“I expect you would be quite satisfied if you got to know her only, and that you would not much care if you never saw him again.”

"Not at all; she would be nothing without him. It is just because she is his wife that she is someone, in a worldly point of view."

How could Ella tell him anything when he talked like that. And then if she did warn him against Fausterley there would inevitably be a breach between them, and though she could not help thinking Charlie was acting meanly in playing the spy upon a man who confided in him, yet she remembered that this underhand action was committed out of the depth of his love for her, and she was sure that for no other motive in the world would he have been guilty of anything to which the most punctilious could object. And, besides, it was so pleasant to have a man constantly about her who always placed her far above all else in the world, who worshipped her as Charlie did. Ah! if she had only met him before Ronald, what a very different woman she would have been.

The next day Mr. Fausterley walked into Macleod's office, and, throwing a little packet on the table, he said:

"Here is the key of Paradise."

"And where is my Agapemone situated?" asked Macleod, as he gratefully pressed his friend's hand.

"Here is the address. It is one of the streets running out of Eaton Square; very quiet-looking outside, but a perfect gem inside. There are only two rooms, which belong to a young artist, who has just furnished them in the most exquisite taste; but, as he goes away in the summer months to paint, he is glad to let them for the moderate sum of three guineas a week. I thought it was rather dear, but everything was so clean and tasteful about them that I thought you would not mind, and I have taken them for a week."

"Thanks; it is awfully good of you to be so prompt; and what did you say about my coming in?"

"I told the landlady that I could not tell what day you would arrive, but that you would be there before ten o'clock when you did come; and as I gave her very good references and her three guineas down, she was satisfied. Now, when you do go there, you can go in by yourself and see her, and afterwards you can be on the look-out and let your *inamorata* in yourself, so that no servant need see her."

"Thanks, old fellow, what a splendid Sganarelle **you** would have made."

"Yes; and I think I should have had a more successful career than the bar seems to hold out to me."

CHAPTER XIV.

HIS HONOUR—AND HERS.

Two days later, as Ronald was musing at his desk, mechanically glancing over business letters and wondering when he should be able to take Ida to see his newly-acquired rooms, a telegram arrived. It was from Sir Algernon, and ran as follows:

"WE have a box at the Lyceum to-night. If you care to come we dine at seven. Don't trouble to answer."

The telegraph boy, accustomed to wait for answers, was standing there stolidly. Ronald, who felt the blood rushing to his temples, took a telegraph form from his desk and wrote: "Thanks, I shall be delighted to come," and handed it, with a shilling, to the boy, who shuffled out of the room, while Ronald glanced at the telegram again. His eye fell on the last words, which he had not noticed before. He was only just in time to stop the boy.

"Give me the message and keep the shilling," he said to the boy, who handed him back the form and rushed out, half-afraid that the gentleman might repent of his generosity before he could reach the street.

"What a fool I am," thought Ronald. "Of course, she sent me the telegram, and she does not want an answer. Perhaps he is away, and we shall be alone."

But suddenly it occurred to him: "I cannot accept this box from a man whom I am striving to injure. How can I eat his salt when I am only waiting a favourable

opportunity to rob him of the greatest treasure he possesses in the world?"

Then his joy was turned to heaviness; and how could he excuse his non-acceptance of her invitation? Was there any possible engagement which he would not, and ought not to, fling aside, for the chance of seeing and speaking to her? and to tell her the truth would be to cast a slur upon her, to say to her "I am more virtuous and upright than you, since you offer me something which I should be ashamed to accept." The only way he could think of, was to pretend that he had not received her invitation till the following morning. "*Oh, la fange de l'adultère!*" he thought, as he gloomily resolved to adopt this course.

As he walked home that afternoon he turned into the park. Though the weather was still cold, the drive was beginning to fill with carriages. As Ronald walked down beside the rails, thinking how he longed to accept the invitation which his better feelings prompted him to ignore, he felt a hand on his shoulder. The hand was Barbour's.

"Hallo, old fellow," said he, as he linked his arm in Ronald's, "this is rather more like it; by Jove, I'm quite proud to walk with you now; will you take a turn with me?"

"It is only right that the master should have a chance of exhibiting his *chef d'œuvre*," answered Ronald, smiling good humouredly.

"Well, my two *chef d'œuvres*," said Barbour, with a wave of his hand towards Ronald, and a glance of great satisfaction at his own attire, "are decidedly making an impression; why look at that carriage, there is a devilish fine woman in it who is evidently taken by storm." Ronald turned his head. There, close beside him, were the Atherleys—contrary to their usual custom—driving together. Ronald would have passed with a bow, but the carriage stopped at that moment, and he felt bound to come forward and speak.

Greatly to Barbour's delight Ronald introduced him to his friends, and he immediately began a conversation with Sir Algernon, who said he would get down for a minute and stretch his legs.

"Are you coming to-night?" asked Lady Atherley, in a low tone.

"Where to?"

"Did you not get my telegram, this afternoon?"

"No; I left my office early."

At this moment Sir Algernon turned round and made some remark to Ronald, and Barbour seized the opportunity of speaking to Lady Atherley.

"Do you often ride in the park?" he asked.

"Not very often. Are you fond of riding?"

"Yes, pretty well. I shall look out for you some of these mornings. I ride a large chestnut with a white star on his forehead."

Ronald, who knew that his collaborateur was invariably at his desk during the morning, and that he neither possessed nor hired a horse, was astounded at the coolness with which he made this announcement, in a tone which could not fail to reach his ears.

"And do you ride much, too, Mr. Macleod?" asked Lady Atherley, who was rather bored with Mr. Barbour's inane manner.

"Oh, no; I can't get away in the mornings. I have to stick to my desk," said Ronald, with an amused look at Barbour.

"You City men all say that," answered Lady Atherley, "and we picture you in some dingy office, turning over piles of musty registers and adding up immense pages of figures, while I daresay you are really enjoying a game of billiards and a cigar in some comfortable club."

"Oh, no," said Barbour, hastening to give his friend what he called "a leg up." "Some men, of course, do that sort of thing, but Mr. Macleod is quite blameless in that way. Why, to-day, for instance, he came to his office at nine o'clock, and never even left his room for a moment till five, and he does that nearly every day."

Macleod scowled so fiercely at this announcement that Barbour began to wonder whether he, too, was going to endeavour to assume a military appearance, and to keep the "shop" as much as possible in the background.

Sir Algernon had moved off a few paces, and

Barbour, who felt that he had made some mistake, sidled away after him, twirling his moustache.

"So you got my telegram and yet you are not coming," said Lady Atherley, hurriedly, with that peculiar hard expression which had so much alarmed Ronald at the Holborn. "I should have thought you would have been glad to put aside any engagement for me, but I suppose my vanity has led me to misread you."

"You know how I long to come, but I cannot be *his* guest."

"If you are going to talk nonsense of that sort, I think it is time our acquaintance ceased."

Ronald felt as if he had been guilty of some crime as he stood there before her cold disdainful glance.

"Forgive me," he said, "I will come to-night. I will do anything, only forgive me!"

"No, you shall not come to-night, and unless you immediately ask some favour of my husband, I shall consider you as a casual acquaintance henceforth. What! you pretend to care for me, to worship the earth beneath my feet, and you hesitate to do violence to a Quixotic feeling to gain a whole evening with me."

"For you I will give up everything—even my position," answered Ronald, who felt his face flushing with shame, as he realized the fact of his disloyalty to his own family.

"And what do you ask me to give up for you?" asked Lady Atherley, haughtily. "Is my honour of so much less consequence than yours?"

Sir Algernon was coming back to the carriage.

"Remember," said Lady Atherley; and then turning to her husband, she said, "Mr. Macleod wants to ask you to do something for him, and he does not like to."

"What can I do for you?" asked Sir Algernon, pompously. "Of course you know that I have not much power while the Radicals are in, but I daresay if it is not anything very important I may be able to manage it."

In the midst of Ronald's embarrassment he suddenly bethought him of Mr. Terbage, the poor old clerk who had worked so hard for him at Sandborough during the election. "Thank Heaven," he thought, "the mean

action which she forces me to perform may profit someone."

"My request is not a very formidable one," said Ronald; "there is an old man who worked very hard in the Conservative cause the other day, and I am most anxious to get his grandson a post as messenger in some Government office."

"Is that all?"

And taking a card from his card-case, he wrote on the back of it, "I shall be much obliged if you will give the bearer of this the first messengership that may become vacant under your board."

"There," he said, "if your *protégé* will take that to Sir John Tuke, Somerset House, the thing is done, provided the lad can read and write. You will see that I am able to help a friend sometimes, notwithstanding the fact that the cold shadow of opposition is hanging over our party."

Lady Atherley smiled approvingly at Ronald, who had earned her forgiveness by his prompt obedience to her whim. But she was not quite satisfied. She felt that he must give her proof that he would not sin again; so turning to her husband she said,

"I have asked Mr. Macleod to dine with us to-morrow, and as he has no engagement he is going to forgive the shortness of the invitation and come; I told him we should be quite alone."

"I am very glad, I'm sure," said Sir Algernon. "I have asked Mr. Harcourt, who was my colleague at the last election, and who was, unfortunately, about a hundred votes behind me and did not get in, but otherwise we shall be alone."

Ronald had not the courage to refuse.

"Thanks," he said, "it is very kind of you;" and with a bow to Lady Atherley he walked on.

He would have given much to avoid this dinner, for the idea of taking anything from Ida's husband was hateful to him; but he felt that there was no help for it, and that he must either overcome these feelings or give up many opportunities of seeing her, and perhaps even lose her altogether.

Lady Atherley, who was not quite sure that her lover would not repent at the last moment and send

some excuse for not coming, was radiant when he arrived, and at dinner she looked at him so kindly that he was quite afraid her glances might be noticed either by Mr. Harcourt or her husband.

Then, too, it was so tantalising not to be able to touch her hand, so that he felt he contributed very little to the general conversation, but sat wondering whether he should be able to manage to see her alone for a few minutes.

When she left the table, Sir Algernon opened a cabinet, which stood near the fire-place, and brought out a small drawer containing cigars, which he offered to his guests. Ronald, who at first refused, ended by selecting a very small one on being pressed by Sir Algernon, who was proud of his cigars. But small as it was, Ronald cut a good bit off the end, and when he had lighted it smoked it as fast as he could. The conversation turned chiefly on the events of Sir Algernon's election, and he and Mr. Harcourt tried to account for the defeat of the latter—going over the names of those voters whom they imagined had gone back from their promises, and planning how to gain them back in the event of another campaign. Then they began considering for what borough Mr. Harcourt might stand again.

Meantime Ronald, who had succeeded in finishing his cigar, rose and said,

“You must have a good deal to talk about, which you could discuss better without me, and so if you will excuse me I will go upstairs and ask Lady Atherley for a little music.”

Sir Algernon, who suddenly remembered that the conversation had been made interesting for one of his guests at the expense of the other, felt rather vexed with himself. He hastened to apologize to Ronald, and begged him to have another glass of wine; but though Macleod was sorry to give his host any feeling of uneasiness, he felt that his apparent want of tact was the only means of seeing Lady Atherley alone for a few minutes, and consequently, refusing Sir Algernon's offer in his blandest manner, he left the room and walked up to the drawing-room.

To his great disappointment he found it empty.

How could he let Lady Atherley know that he was there? He felt certain that Sir Algernon and Mr. Harcourt would come upstairs as soon as their cigars were finished, so that the utmost time he could count upon was from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour, and it was too hard to lose even an instant of that precious time.

Unfortunately he could not play, although years ago he had learnt one or two waltzes, which he had long since forgotten. However, something must be done, so opening the door wide, and sitting down at the piano, he boldly made a dash at the "Guards" waltz. It was a fearful performance, for his fingers had become stiff during the long years which had passed since he last made such a use of them, and the number of wrong notes which he played with his left hand, bid fair to disguise the air, which he managed rather better with his right.

"If she can hear this," he thought, "she will lose no time in coming to put a stop to it."

He was right; he had not been playing more than a minute when he saw her standing in the doorway.

"I had no idea you were a musician," she said laughingly, as she came in and closed the door.

"You understood my music. I hoped you would, and I sincerely trust that downstairs it may not have been very audible; but perhaps they will think it is some of the music of the future."

She came up to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He passed his arm round her waist and drew her to him.

"Why, you have been smoking," she said.

"Yes; I could not well get out of it to-night, but I am so sorry if you dislike it."

"I love it; but as you wouldn't do it at the Holborn Restaurant the other night I thought you did not care about it."

"That was only because I fancied you might dislike it afterwards, if I should happen to kiss you in the cab."

"You dear boy! But they will be wondering why you have stopped your extraordinary symphony."

He rose, and she took his place at the piano, and

while she allowed her fingers to wander over the keys, playing a medley of half-forgotten pieces, he spoke to her of his love, and told her of the rooms that were waiting for her, if she would deign to meet him any afternoon and accept his hospitality. But she only shook her head and smiled as she looked into his eyes.

"It would be too compromising," she said at last.

Then he explained how he could go to the rooms first, and let her in without even a servant seeing her either as she came or went, so that it would be impossible for anyone to know of her visit.

But still she shook her head, and said: "But we should know it—you and I—and that is already too much in itself."

Then he urged her to fix some early day to meet him or drive with him again; to go anywhere where he could see her and speak to her. She had just ceased playing, when they heard voices on the stairs.

"I will write," she said, hurriedly.

Ronald was standing very near her—too near, he felt, but he could not get away farther from her without running the risk of being seen moving away, so he snatched a song from the music stand beside him, and said:

"Do sing this. I am so fond of it."

He had not even had time to see if it was a song or a piece of music, but it fortunately happened to be "Ay Chiquita."

"It is a very old song," said Lady Atherley, "but I will sing it if you like it."

Then, as the rich full tones of her voice filled the room, the plaintive melody seemed to penetrate Ronald's soul, and though he had heard the song a hundred times, he found in it a charm he had never known before.

As the words at the end "*la morte de désespoir*" died away, and the room was silent, even Mr. Harcourt, who was not an impressionable man, rose from his seat and coming across the room said, "What an exquisite song."

Sir Algernon was proud of his wife's voice and asked her to sing it again, but she felt that an impression

such as she had just made cannot be immediately repeated, so she took up something more cheerful and sang that instead.

Ronald found it so difficult to take any part in the general conversation which followed that he left as soon as he could.

For some days he looked anxiously for a letter, but none came. He called on the fourth day, but Lady Atherley was out. Could she have forgotten her promise to write to him, or was it that she did not care much to see him and intended leaving their next meeting to chance? He longed to write, but he knew so little of the Atherleys that he could not tell whether Sir Algernon might not open his wife's letters. It behoved him, then, to be very careful how he wrote, for write he must. After much consideration he sent her the following note, hoping she would read between the lines—

“DEAR LADY ATHERLEY,—I have been trying to get that lovely song you sang to us the other evening, but in vain. ‘*Je sais que j'en vais mourir*’ is one of the lines in it, and I daresay you will understand what I mean, though the shopmen where I have tried for it could not recognise it by those words. I would not have troubled you to send me the name of it, but I unfortunately missed you when I called to-day, and I am very anxious to get the song.

“I am, yours faithfully,

“RONALD MACLEOD.”

At least there was nothing compromising in such a note, but would she understand the expression of anxiety which he meant to convey to her in the line of the song he had selected?

The next day he received a short note in reply:—

“DEAR MR. MACLEOD,—The name of the song is ‘Ay Chiquita.’ It is an old song now, and may be difficult to get. Sir Algernon is going down to Holbeach to-morrow to a Conservative luncheon, and I shall follow him in the afternoon, as I want to hear him speak at a banquet in the evening.

“Yours sincerely,

“CONSTANCE ATHERLEY.”

She had understood, then, but it would have been kinder if she had told him by what train she was going—waiting is so trying. So thought Ronald, but when he had taken up a railway-guide and found that the only trains to Holbeach started at eleven o'clock in the morning, and a quarter to three and a quarter to six in the afternoon, he understood that Sir Algernon must go by the first train, and that in order to arrive in time for a banquet, Lady Atherley would have to go by the second. Armed with this knowledge, Ronald was at King's Cross Station at half-past two. This time he had not many minutes to wait; but when Lady Atherley arrived there was very little time for taking her ticket, and seeing her into the train, but Ronald found time to tell her how anxious he had been about her not writing to him.

"But I never write," said Lady Atherley, "and you must do as you think best—just as if I had no power to put pen to paper. I may send a telegram, but you must never expect a letter from me."

"But can I write to you?"

"Yes, if your letters arrive between ten and two; at other times they are not safe. For instance, your letter about the song arrived last night when we were at dinner, and my husband asked me from whom it came. I did not know what madness you might have been guilty of; and I suppose I looked a little disconcerted, for he asked me to show it to him. I threw it to him unopened. He hesitated for a moment, and then opened it. He read it aloud to me, and I was so thankful for your caution. He seemed half ashamed of himself all the evening after, and when I wrote the reply to your letter and handed him my answer, he folded it for me and put it in an envelope without looking at it. I don't think he will open a letter from you again, but it is better that he should not see many in your handwriting; and besides I cannot trust him, so be very careful not to write unless you are sure that I am in town—and even then don't say anything compromising if you can help it."

Ronald had scarcely time to promise that he would be circumspect before the train started off. The interview had been short, but he felt happy, for it seemed to

him that unless Lady Atherley returned his love she could hardly give him so much encouragement.

But as the train bore her away she was thinking: "I suppose I am behaving very badly to Ronald, for I don't think I really love him; but then it is so hard to be nasty to a man when he is so fond of me, and I think, poor fellow, it would kill him if I were to change towards him now. Then what woman would refuse to be flattered and surrounded by so nice a young man? But what is the use of bothering about it? I suppose he will get over it gradually, and things will come all right in the end." And, settling herself comfortably to read a paper which she had brought with her, Ronald's image soon passed out of her mind.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS GOOSEBERRY.

DAYS passed away and brought Ronald no tidings of Lady Atherley. He called at her house and was told that she was out of town. She had been staying a few days in the country with a Mrs. Langmore, an old friend of her mother's, who had a very pretty house down near Maidenhead, where she lived during the summer with her only daughter, Maud. But at the same time she always kept a set of rooms furnished in Victoria Square, so that if the weather was bad she and her daughter could come up to town at a moment's notice and escape the dulness of the country.

Maud Langmore had the highest admiration for Lady Atherley, to whom she looked up with all the deference which a young girl feels for a woman of the world. Kept under strict surveillance by her mother, not allowed to read a novel or to see a play unless Mrs. Langmore had satisfied herself that it was strictly blameless, she was yet allowed to go about with Lady Atherley whenever she was asked. Careful never to

say anything which might make her friend less anxious to take her about, she often saw things which she could not think right, although she never showed that she disapproved of them. By degrees Lady Atherley had acquired the habit of speaking quite freely to her, and she had become deeply interested in Captain Greville.

"How lucky you are, Constance," she would say, "to have plenty of money and a man who adores you besides; ah, poor me, I shall never have either. And then Lady Atherley would kiss her and tell her that all that would come in time. It happened that on the day Lady Atherley's visit to the Langmores was over, the weather had become very wet and cold, and Maud had persuaded her mother to let her go up with their guest to London, and Lady Atherley had promised to go up to Victoria Square and stay the night there with her, and, if the weather remained cold, Mrs. Langmore was to come up on the following day.

"Isn't this perfect?" said Maud, as they travelled up to town; "now you must promise to have some fun to-night, and take me to some nice bad theatre or something deliciously naughty."

"What do you think of dining at the Criterion, and going to the Alhambra afterwards?"

"Oh, it would be pure," said Maud, her large, dark eyes growing larger, and her pearly teeth glistening in the sun. "But could we go without a gentleman?"

"No, but it is easy to get one. I will telegraph to a friend of mine, a Mr. Macleod, and I am sure he will come if he possibly can."

"Oh, but is it quite safe to let him know?"

"My dear Maud, I am sure you might trust him with anything; he is an awfully nice fellow too, only a little too sentimental."

"How delightful!"

"Well, you must be very nice to him, and I am sure he will fall in love with you."

"Not when you are there, Constance."

"Ah! that is just it. He is very fond of me, but when he compares me with you he will see how much younger and fresher you are, and be certain to transfer his allegiance."

"I'm afraid that is not likely, though it would be much better as you are married."

"Well, but so is he."

"Oh, I say, Constance, doesn't it sound wicked?"

"Yes; but 'pure,' as you would say. How I wish you could get him to like you. I am tired of him, for though I like him very much I feel he is too *exigeant*, and will be satisfied with nothing less than a serious passion. Now of course, as you have no ties, and you often have spare time on your hands, it would be a pleasant distraction for you—if you could take a fancy to him—only you must be careful of him, for he is awfully affectionate."

Lady Atherley looked into Maud's eyes as she said this, with a little funny smile which made the girl blush.

When the train arrived at the station, Lady Atherley sent a telegram to Ronald as follows:—

"Just returned to town; have to dine with a friend at the Criterion to-night; will you come too?"

During the days that Ronald had heard no tidings of Constance he had had more time to think of his private affairs, and he found that monetary matters were not by any means a pleasant theme to think upon. He had, however, been able in a business transaction to oblige a director of an important railway very considerably, and this gentleman had told him that a scheme of fusion was on foot between his board and that of a neighbouring company, which, if carried, would greatly increase the market value of the shares of both companies. In fact, the vague rumours of the scheme which had oozed out had of themselves raised the price three or four per cent., and Ronald's friend had promised to let him have the earliest intelligence as to the success or failure of the scheme, on condition that he should not buy or sell more than ten thousand of the stock. At the time Lady Atherley had despatched her telegram to him Ronald was waiting anxiously for a message from his friend the director. When, therefore, Lady Atherley's telegram was brought in he tore open the envelope eagerly, and was delighted to find that it came from her. But who could the friend

be? Of course, he would dine with her. When he had cross-questioned her about her former life he had filled his mind with doubts. What if the friend should be a former lover? He could not bear to see them together, guessing their past. He resolved that he would find out who this friend was, and be guided by circumstances as to whether he would dine with her or not.

He accordingly telegraphed:—

“DELIGHTED. You mention no hour. I will call about five at the address you give. If you are out, please leave word where and when to meet you.”

He also prepaid a reply, hoping that when the telegraph boy should say that he was waiting for an answer she might send one.

The weather had been clearing up all day and the sun had now come out bright and warm, and Ronald felt thoroughly happy. His pen went so glibly that he felt certain his work would all be finished in time to drive to Victoria Square by five o'clock. Another telegram was brought to him. “How good of her to answer,” thought Ronald, but on opening it he found it was from his friend the director, and contained only these words, “Fallen through.” Impatiently crushing it up in his hand he tossed it into the fire and dismissed the telegraph boy. His heart was too full of the meeting in store for him to let him pay any attention to money matters, and he went on writing mechanically in order to get his work finished.

At a few minutes to five he was driving down the Buckingham Palace Road, when just as he was getting to Victoria Square a hansom passed him with Lady Atherley and Maud Langmore in it. They had not seen him, and their hansom dashed on. Frantically waving his stick, Ronald stopped his own cab and promised the cabman half-a-crown if he could catch the cab which had just passed. It was an exciting chase for Ronald, who feared that he might lose sight of it. But as they were passing Buckingham Palace he overtook it, and succeeded in stopping both cabs. Springing into the road, which was still muddy from the morning's rain, he took Lady Atherley's hand.

"Are you coming to-night?" she said, rather pleased that Maud Langmore should see how delighted he was to meet her.

"Oh, of course I am coming; but at what time?"

"Half-past seven. This is the friend who is to dine with us; let me introduce you. Miss Langmore—Mr. Macleod."

Ronald's face had looked happy before, but when he heard that the friend whom he had so dreaded was not her former lover, not even a man at all, it became perfectly radiant; and as he stood there full in the sunlight, heedless alike of the mud which the passing cabs flung upon him and of the passers-by who stared at seeing a man stopping in such an inconvenient place, Maud knew at once that his was no passing fancy for Lady Atherley, but a deep and true passion.

When a moment later they drove off and Lady Atherley asked her what she thought of their escort, she answered:—

"He looks nice enough, but I am afraid he will wish I had stayed away, and it is quite evident that there is no fear of his being so obliging as to take a fancy to me, as you had so prettily arranged that he should."

"Well, who can tell? It is true he is 'gone' on me now, but though he is a dear good fellow, I wish for both your sakes, he would fall in love with you, for I really feel rather guilty about him; but I have every confidence in those eyes of yours, if you only care to use them."

Shortly before the appointed hour Ronald was standing at the centre door of the "Criterion." He lighted a cigar, fearing that it was only too probable he would have time to smoke it before the ladies arrived. People were arriving; now and then some young man with a crutch-stick in his hand and a tooth-pick in his mouth, would come and look at the *menu*, and either go in or turn away according as the dishes offered suited his taste or not. Some diners slunk in as if they were ashamed to be seen going there. Others strutted in as if they thought it rather "the swagger thing," as they would express it. A rustic-looking woman with a young couple of somewhat similar appearance stood opposite the entrance for a moment and they peered in,

with a look of awe upon their countenances while she told them what a grand place it was, adding, with manifest pride, "I've dined there once, Charlie Green took me there—you know Charlie, from old Tibbalt's farm, well, 'e took me, and done the thing like a real gentleman, I can tell you. Champagne! Lord it was fine to 'ear 'im swear at the waiters just as if the 'ole place was his."

But though there was plenty for Ronald to look at, he could not help beginning to feel a little nervous when he saw that his cigar was getting very short and the ladies did not appear.

At last, about eight o'clock, they arrived. Then Ronald's heart was full of joy. The party walked through the brilliantly lighted room and found a little table in one corner disengaged. All three were determined to enjoy themselves, and they did. Miss Langmore thought the whole thing "so delightfully Bohemian," as she expressed it—"so fast" she really meant—though she would not say so to a stranger like Ronald.

Ronald, for his part, was quite carried away by his spirits, for every remark made by his companions he found some jest, foolish or brilliant, but always uttered with such gaiety of heart that his hearers laughed heartily with him, and though Lady Atherley had felt a little dull at first, both she and Maud Langmore ended by catching Ronald's mad humour, and they all three laughed so much that the people at the next table began to notice them.

"Now, Miss Langmore, you really must behave more decorously," said Ronald, with a gesture towards an elderly snuff-begrimed Scotchman at the next table, who, with a pencil in his hand, was carefully adding up his bill. "Don't you see there's a 'chiel amang ye takin' notes'?"

"And faith he'll prent it," added Lady Atherley, finishing the quotation.

"No matter," answered Maud Langmore, "I can tell by his whole appearance that he is a writer of fashionable intelligence for *Truth* or some such paper, and of course if he puts it in that everybody will say it can't be true."

"Yes; say it is false, and believe it as though it were gospel," answered Lady Atherley.

"If that's all the faith they'll put in it," retorted Ronald, "we may let the old fellow take notes to his heart's content."

During a momentary pause in the conversation Ronald heard a gentleman at a neighbouring table say that there had been almost a panic on the Stock Exchange late that afternoon.

"This is interesting," said Ronald to Lady Atherley. "I want to hear about this panic."

They listened for a moment, and heard how the failure of the fusion scheme, of which Ronald had had notice, had been officially announced at three o'clock, and how the stock of the railway in which his friend was a director had fallen nearly five per cent. in half an hour.

"What a bore," said Ronald, "and to think that I had the intelligence nearly two hours before it was announced."

"Then you made money," said Lady Atherley, who did not understand the mysteries of "bull" and "bear," but who knew that to speculators early intelligence of any event generally means profit.

"No," said Ronald, "I didn't, but I ought to have," and, as he thought how an order to sell "ten" of the stock would have paid a considerable portion of those election expenses which he found so inconvenient, a momentary cloud passed over his brow.

But in an instant he was as gay as ever, for he thought, "What is money compared to a priceless evening like this?"

The dinner was over. Macleod called for the bill. Lady Atherley felt embarrassed for a moment, she who fancied that the situation was not invented which could embarrass her. She had asked Ronald to dine with her, she knew him to be badly off, and felt that she did not like to let him pay for the dinner, neither did she like to run the risk of wounding his feelings by paying herself.

"You have asked for the bill," she said at last, feeling that something must be done, and at the same time half-timidly placing her purse beside him on the table.

Ronald's first impulse was to push it way and say "How absurd," but he divined her embarrassment, and he therefore merely took the purse and put it in his pocket. When the bill was brought he paid it with his own money, and later in the evening he handed the purse back to Lady Atherley, who was charmed at the way in which he had got over the difficulty. When the trio came downstairs they had not decided how they should spend the remainder of the evening. For a few minutes they stood at the entrance of the "Criterion" deliberating.

"It is too late for any theatre," said Ronald, "except the Alhambra."

"I know people go to that rather late," said Lady Atherley. "Shall we go there?"

All three seemed undecided. It was a lovely evening in the beginning of July, and the air was soft and delicious.

"How perfect to be by the sea to-night," said Miss Langmore.

"Yes, heavenly," said Lady Atherley.

"But would it not be better to choose some nearer place for to-night," hazarded Ronald.

"Let us walk along a little and deliberate as we go," said Lady Atherley, laughing.

They turned down Waterloo Place, by the Duke of York's column. The steps here are steep, and it was growing dark. Lady Atherley took Ronald's arm, and Maud took her other hand.

As they walked under the trees in the Mall, which was almost deserted, Maud said,

"This reminds me of Paris."

"Oh, Paris doux sejour,
Du printemps et des amours,"

sang Ronald.

"How I love it," said Lady Atherley, "with its delicious shady walks in the Bois; its gay restaurants; and its *cafés chantants*."

Ronald, who had been in Paris the year before, and who was an excellent mimic, began to sing some of Libert's comic songs in a low voice, but with a capital imitation of that artiste's *gonailleur* manner in "*La femme*

à Papa,” “*Je vais z’aux z’eaux z’avec Zaza,*” and others. The two ladies were enchanted.

“I suppose the comic songs here are not nearly so amusing,” said Lady Atherley.

“I don’t care for them much,” said Ronald, “but have you never heard any?”

“Never. Let us go and hear some now; wouldn’t it be fun?”

“Oh, yes, it would be pure,” chimed in Miss Langmore, with her favourite expression.

“I am afraid not absolutely so,” said Ronald, “and you must not be disappointed if it is not great fun, but we can go to the ‘Canterbury.’”

They had reached the end of the Mall. There was no cab to be seen but only hansoms.

“Never mind,” said Lady Atherley, “let us take a hansom. Maud can sit on my knee, for if we wait we may lose something good.”

They got into a hansom and drove off. At first Maud sat on Lady Atherley’s knees, but after a little demurring she accepted a seat partly on Ronald’s and partly on Constance’s.

Behind her back the two lovers were whispering to each other, their faces very close together, so that Maud might not hear. The cab jolted so much that Ronald had to pass his arm round Constance’s waist to keep them both steady, while he reminded her of another drive they had taken together some two or three months before; and even then he could not keep his hand from touching hers.

Once Maud looked round, but she was a discreet girl, and turned her head back so quickly that she saw nothing.

On arriving at the Canterbury Theatre, as the manager called it (not liking the term “Music Hall” any longer since the grand spectacle “Plevna” attracted a more fashionable audience to his house), Ronald was about to take a box, but Lady Atherley would not allow it.

“No,” she said, “you must obey orders to-night, and do exactly as we bid you. Now, we want to see this place thoroughly, and we want to see the people too; so you must just take us among them. We won’t go into a box or stalls!”

Ronald complied and took them into the two shilling seats. The ladies were both plainly but very elegantly dressed, so that when they came in the people, who turned round at their entrance, concluded that they were going to pass round the back of the gallery to the boxes on the farther side of the hall. But when having passed only a short distance along they sat down, the people around them stared at them in astonishment.

A lady's maid near them was delighted that her young man had taken her into a place where they saw such good company.

"Well," said a young draper, turning to his friend, "if I got a pair of elegant gals like that to come out with me, I'm blowed if I wouldn't pop my ticker to get 'em a box."

The ladies, on hearing that "popping a ticker" meant "pawning a watch," were immensely amused.

But now everyone's attention was turned to the stage. The *habitués* were greeting with hearty applause the entrance of Mr. Charles Lestar, the "Immense Comique," as he delighted to call himself. He was a tall, rather stout, and coarse-looking man of about thirty-five, wearing a suit of evening dress, with an elaborate embroidered shirt front, large imitation diamond studs, patent leather boots, and a light grey overcoat thrown wide open. On his head he wore an opera hat very much on one side, and in his gloved hands he carried a crutch stick.

While the orchestra played a few bars as a prelude to the song he was about to sing, he sauntered jauntily about the stage, and then stopping suddenly in the centre, he began:—

"She was such a darling girl,
And wasn't she fair,
She lived with a maiden aunt
In Hanover Square;
I asked her to marry me,
For I was such spoons,
But she's now on her honeymoon
With a captain of Dragoons."

The song consisted of a dozen verses at least, none of which threw any further light upon the story contained

in the first few lines which did duty as a chorus, and were repeated twice at the end of each verse. Naturally the "Immense Comique" could not stand still and sing his song without moving, and as the want of variety in the sense of the words made it impossible to find appropriate gestures for each line he displayed great ingenuity in constantly finding something to keep the audience attentive—first he buttoned up his overcoat, then he took off his hat, and pressing it together slowly, held it first in one hand, then fanned himself with it and passed it on to the other, and a line or two later stuck it under his arm. After that he took off his white kid gloves and put them carefully into his pocket. This seemed to give him a new idea, for deliberately unbuttoning his overcoat again he produced from an inner pocket a silk handkerchief with a crimson border, unfolded it with great care, shook it out, and having wiped his mouth with it in an airy manner made his opera hat spring open again, and flung the handkerchief into it. Then, too, he made several points out of the singing of the chorus. The first time he sang it impassively, the second time with a lachrymose air, the third time he prefaced it with a "Chorus, gentlemen." After that he sang it as if he were listening attentively, and then said "Not quite enough spirit in it to please me." Then the audience joined in more boldly and he thanked them with a bow. Lastly he did not sing it at all, but just started it and then remained silent, waving his crutch stick as a conductor's baton, while the audience, who had learnt the air pretty correctly by this time, sang it loudly, and when the singer retired from the stage, the people, delighted with his and their own efforts, cheered boisterously and pronounced the song a great success.

"What do you think of it?" asked Ronald.

"It is rather funny," said Lady Atherley, "but the song is not witty."

"But a music-hall is scarcely the place to find wit," answered Ronald.

"Is this all?" asked Miss Langmore in a whisper, "why I don't see anything improper in it, and if it weren't for the tobacco I shouldn't mind taking my mother to see it."

"If you want to do the thing properly you must have some refreshments," said Ronald. "What will you have?"

"Oh, let us take the popular drink of the place," said Lady Atherley, laughing. "What is it?"

"Well, I suppose bottled beer and brandy and soda are the chief favourites."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Langmore, delighted. "Let us have some B. and S., only won't it look awfully bad?"

"Well, Mr. Macleod must order it for himself, and we will have some out of his glass," said Lady Atherley.

Ronald did as he was bid. The two ladies sipped out of his glass. Miss Langmore was quite happy to think she was doing something "awfully fast," and she offered to light a cigarette for Ronald, an offer which he had not the heart to refuse as he saw her mind was set upon it.

Once more the "Immense Comique" appeared on the stage. He had an old battered hat on his head, a pair of black trousers much too short for him, a green coat buttoned up to the chin, and no shirt collar.

"Why, it is the same man again," exclaimed Lady Atherley, "only he has put some flour on his face and painted his nose red."

"Hang it, so it is," chimed in Miss Langmore, who felt that she was really seeing something of fast life, and that she must adapt her language to the scene lest Ronald should think she was too innocent, "I don't care for him a little bit, confound him."

Ronald, who found little to amuse him in the performance, smiled at the little farce Miss Langmore was acting for his benefit; meanwhile, Charlie Lestar was telling, in a doleful ballad, of the family afflictions which were falling upon him.

"Whatever am I to do?"

It's 'run for the doctor, do.'

First it's a daughter, then it's a son,

Sometimes, alas! it's more than one.

I begin to believe, 'pon my word, now, I do,

My wife's the old woman who lived in a shoe."

"I don't like this song," said Lady Atherley; "it is stupid."

"Yes," said Ronald. "Shall we go?"

"Oh, no, but let us talk instead of listening to it."

Ronald was only too glad, so he conversed with her in a low tone, while Maud Langmore listened attentively to the song. He had but one topic now—his love for her, his admiration, his hopes and fears for the future—and every now and then as he spoke to her with the unwonted eloquence born of his passion for her, the chorus would break in—"Whatever am I to do?"

To anyone less thoroughly in earnest than he, this incongruity between his surroundings and conversation would have been either ludicrous or painful; probably the scene would have forced itself upon him had not his heart and brain been so full of "her" that there was no room for external things to make any impression upon him. All he felt was that "she" was beside him, and that he loved her.

"Well, this is too absurd," broke in Miss Langmore, suddenly. "I believe there is only one performer in this place. Here's the 'Immense Comique' back again. Do look, Mr. Macleod."

"Oh, yes; that is always so. Each popular artiste sings three songs in succession, and in this way, when they have done with one music-hall, they can drive off and sing at another."

This time Charlie Lestar was dressed as a countryman. He sang a song in which he praised the chief acts of the late Government, but each verse ended up with—

"And we'll now give the other poor beggars a turn."

Lady Atherley was listening attentively.

"That's very good," she said, "but I wonder the people like it. I should say it was almost a Conservative song."

"Well, you see," explained Ronald, "it is very undecided. The singer is feeling the pulse of the public. These fellows are very quick at seeing the faults of a Government, and I have no doubt that, if this song lasts a little longer, it will become more Conservative still. The Government have not had time to make many blunders yet, but you will notice that those

which they have perpetrated are touched upon. I believe that these songs are a pretty sure indication of the tendency of public opinion among the lower classes in London."

The next part of the performance consisted of a ballet, with which Miss Langmore was much pleased; but the two lovers were too much taken up with each other to see much of it. Miss Langmore had caught a momentary glimpse of two gentlemen, very correctly dressed in black coats and white ties, talking to some of the coryphées behind the wings, and she felt that she was really seeing life, and she was consequently happy for the rest of the evening. The ballet over, Lady Atherley proposed to go, and Ronald found the drive in the hansom from the Canterbury to Victoria Square all too short. Lady Atherley, sorry that another pleasant evening was over, maliciously observed to Ronald that it was a pity Miss Langmore had not been with them during that other drive from the "Holborn," as it was evident that her presence kept him in order. Taking this as a challenge, Ronald passed his arm round her, and—keeping his eyes the while fixed on Miss Langmore—kissed her softly. But Maud was determined not to see anything, and kept her face turned towards the horse, not even turning round when either of the lovers made a remark to her, so that Ronald, growing bolder, kissed Ida again and again.

"Here we are," exclaimed Maud, suddenly, as the cab turned into Victoria Square, while Ronald and Ida, who could not believe they had yet crossed Westminster Bridge, hastily drew away from one another.

"May I come in for a minute?" asked Ronald, as Maud sprang out on the pavement.

"Not to-night," answered Lady Atherley, as she pressed his hand. "It would not do, don't you understand?"

Poor Ronald did not understand, but with a shake of the hand for each lady, and after many thanks from them for their enjoyable evening, he walked off as the door opened.

"You poor dear Connie," said Maud, as the two

ladies went upstairs together. "I know I was awfully heavy for you in the cab. I declare you are quite flushed. I did so wish I could have gone in another hansom instead of incommoding you so much; but I felt it would not do," and she smiled maliciously.

"Oh, I was quite comfortable, thanks; but what did you think of our cicerone—frankly, did you like him?"

"He has good eyes, and those French songs he sang made one think for a moment that one was back in dear old Paris again, and then, too, he made me laugh a good deal at dinner, but he has one immense fault."

"And what is that?"

"He never looked at poor me. I tried to catch those large liquid eyes of his once or twice, but as you always sat between us I noticed that his glances never got beyond you. It must be delicious to have a man so awfully in love with you, only I own I should be a little frightened of him if he looked at me as he does at you."

"What nonsense, child, he likes me very well as a friend, but—"

"I think if we translated that word 'friend' into French it would end in a-n-t instead of in i. But seriously, dear, I hope you are not so fond of him as he is of you."

"Oh, I like him very well, you know, he is very sympathetic and kind to me, but nothing more than that. He is what Captain Greville would call 'a good old sort.'"

But though Maud had never turned her head in the cab, she knew pretty well what was going on, and as she undressed that night she thought to herself,

"My time will come some day; when once the magic ring has been placed on my finger, I too shall have slaves at my command. I wonder when that stupid old Harry will make up his mind to say the words which are always rising to his lips, and give me life and freedom for myself, instead of watching the happiness of others while I play the unattractive part of 'Miss Gooseberry.'"

CHAPTER XV.

THE LITTLE RIFT.

"COME at once to Victoria Square;" so ran a telegram which was put into Ronald's hands a few days after the evening at the Canterbury. What could have happened? Fearful some misfortune had befallen Lady Atherley, he hastened to obey her summons. On arriving at the house where he had last seen her, he found a carriage waiting at the door. He was shown upstairs into the tiny little drawing-room, where he waited ten minutes before anyone came to him. Then Lady Atherley appeared. She wore a black cotton dress with white spots, a coquettish little straw hat; and she was buttoning her gloves as she came in.

"I feared some bad news," he said, "but you look so radiant that I am reassured; but why did you send for me?"

"Because I am starting for Norway, and I felt I should like to say good-bye before I went." And she put both her hands into Ronald's. His face fell. Leading her to an easy chair, he sat down on one of the arms of it.

"Tell me all about it," he said, anxiously.

"There is nothing to tell. Prince Nieszcwski has invited us to go in his yacht for quite a long voyage. First we are to cruise about the south coast for a few days 'to get our sea legs on,' as I believe they call it, then we are to go to Norway, where Sir Algernon will join us for awhile, and after that we shall sail down the Mediterranean—at least, the men of the party will go round by sea, but Maud Langmore and I are going to avoid the Bay of Biscay, and after taking a peep at Paris, we shall join the yacht again at Marseilles."

"What a long time you will be away."

"No, not so very long. We expect to be at Venice

by the 1st of October, and we shall return to town shortly after that."

"And this is only the beginning of July! I know it is selfish, but I can't help wishing you would not be away so long."

"Oh, three months will soon pass."

"For you, perhaps. You will have your darling self always with you, and in such company the time cannot seem long. But I, I shall never see you, perhaps not hear from you, all that time."

"I will write when I can, but where can I safely send letters?"

"To my City address; and if you do write, always say where I can send you an answer, for I shall be dying to tell you a hundred things."

"I will. But tell me, did you like Maud very much?"

"Yes, for I fancy she is a friend of yours; and she was so charitable to me in the cab coming home."

"Yes; you behaved very badly. Do you know, you quite made me love you that night."

Lady Atherley's head was close down against the side of the carriage.

"Do you remember telling me once that you wished for a fortune?" she continued.

"Yes, frequently; but simply in order to treat it according to its deserts, to show that I have no respect for it."

"What extraordinary ideas!"

"Yes, I have often wished to be rich in order to display the contempt I feel for money, and I can remember having fallen asleep two or three times with the idea of going to seek a wife in America," at the same time laying his hand upon her own, while she gently pushed it away.

He understood, and took his hand away immediately.

"You are a good, obedient boy," she said, rising from her seat, "but that wretched Maud is making us late, and I must hurry her. We should be on the way to the station by this time, as the yacht starts from Gravesend this afternoon. Good-bye."

Ronald drove to the Charing Cross Station, and had the satisfaction of seeing her pass with her sister, Maud, Prince Nieszczewski, and Captain Greville.

As he recognised the Austrian nobleman he

thought sadly how easy it would be for a man of his well-known powers of fascination to gain a woman's heart during the three months he was to be on board the yacht with her. "But I must not look at the black side of things," he thought, as he watched the train steaming out of the station, "let me rather feel grateful for the happiness I have received at her hands, and trust that it is only an earnest of what is to come."

But had Ronald been aware of the cause of this yachting excursion, he would not have troubled himself much about the Austrian.

A few days before this occasion, Captain Greville and his friend had been talking over the change in Lady Atherley's manner.

"She hardly ever sees me now," said Greville, moodily, "and I fear your suspicions must be correct."

"No doubt of it, old fellow. I feel certain that some man has come between you, and I am almost equally sure that I have not seen him with her. What do you intend to do?"

"Find out who the fellow is to begin with, and then——"

"That's no use. You would be no happier, for you would either be disagreeable to him in her presence, or abuse his personal appearance, or upbraid her; any of which courses would be a fatal mistake. No, my dear fellow, you must excuse my saying so, but your inamorata is a trifle *volage*, and I fancy that you need not fear the possibility of anyone making a deep impression on her. But at the same time, as this fancy of hers annoys you, I should recommend you to withdraw her from the influence of this man, whoever he may be."

Greville agreed with his friend, and out of this conversation grew the journey to Norway, which was soon afterwards undertaken. As Sir Algernon might refuse to allow his wife to go away for so long a time with her cousin (of whom he entertained some suspicions) even under the protection of her sister, Niesczewski undertook to form a party, and to induce Sir Algernon to join it later, if, as Greville supposed, his Parliamentary duties would not allow him to leave at once.

Accordingly Mrs. Huntingdon, Lady Atherley, Miss

Langmore and her brother—a boy of twenty, who had just passed for the army, and was waiting to be appointed to a regiment—and Captain Greville accepted the invitation of the Prince and Princess, while Sir Algernon had agreed to join the party about a month later in Norway, where he might get some fishing, an amusement of which he was passionately fond.

Two or three days before starting Greville had an interview with Lady Atherley, in which he had spoken to her of the pain which her altered manner had caused him. This expostulation on his part led to an angry scene, which, however, was followed by the reconciliation of the lovers, and Lady Atherley, thinking that she had treated him badly after the constant devotion which he had shown her, felt something like a return of the love of long ago as she talked over the happy times they were to have together on the yacht. But then, again, the evening at the "Criterion" with Ronald had deepened the impression which he had made upon her, so that when the moment came to sail she was almost sorry to go.

But though Ronald was rather sad as he walked away from the Charing Cross Station, thinking how long Ida's absence must seem to him, yet her promise that she would write, and the hope that at last he had secured some place in her heart, prevented him from feeling despondent.

A week had passed, and Ronald was beginning to wonder whether she would really keep her promise, when a letter from her was brought to him. It told him of a collision which had taken place between Prince Nieszcwski's yacht and another. Ronald's first thought was one of sickening fear at the idea that she had been in danger, but this was soon turned to thankfulness for her preservation.

The letter went on to say that the damage done was slight, but that it would take some three days or so to repair, and that in the meantime Ida and Mrs. Huntingdon would remain at the little village of Lowcliffe, but that the remainder of the party had gone back to town for a couple of days.

Ronald's joy knew no bounds. It was true her letter

did not say "come," but surely he could not be wrong in interpreting it to mean that. Hastening home to get a few necessities, he left word for Ella, who happened to be out, that he was going to dine with a friend some way out of town and might not be back that night. And taking the next train he arrived at Lowcliffe at about five o'clock.

Recognising the necessity for caution, Ronald did not go at once to the address given in Lady Atherley's letter, but, inquiring for the best hotel in the village, he learnt that there was only one, and that it was rather full, so that he might be unable to get a bed there.

The Bell Vue Hotel is a quaint old-fashioned house looking on to the sea, and when Ronald rang the bell a bald-headed knock-kneed waiter shuffled along sleepily in his slippers to answer his inquiries as to the possibility of getting a room.

The waiter thought it impossible, but when Ronald had called for the landlord, asked him to drink a bottle of wine with him, and explained that any sort of room would be good enough for him, the thing was managed.

"It's very awkward," said the landlord. "This house is very small for the place, now that the London folk are beginning to come down to Lowcliffe, and I can't get my alterations done till next summer. Why, only the day before yesterday there was a party landed here from a yacht, and we couldn't put 'em up, and I was sorry, I can tell you, for they were the right sort to have in a hotel; but I had to arrange with Lawyer Perkins to let them have three rooms in his house, and then most of 'em went back to London, because there wasn't room for 'em here."

"Is it such a small house, then?"

"Oh, no; it's a good, tidy-sized house. Look out there, sir. It's the last but one, close down into the sea."

Ronald had learnt what he wanted without asking a single question. So, finishing his wine and ordering dinner for eight o'clock, he strolled out along the beach.

He did not like to go straight to the house and ask for Lady Atherley, as he feared he might be doing something which would vex her, so he thought he

would look at the house in which she was staying, and try if he could get some sign from her, before asking for her.

The lawyer's house was one of a row of modern villas, two stories high, with a verandah running along a few feet below the windows of the upper rooms. It was so near the sea, that at high tide the garden wall was washed by the waves, and in stormy weather the spray was thrown against the windows, but the ground rose so suddenly that there was no chance of the sea encroaching much upon the garden, though the water had once destroyed a portion of the massive stone wall. It was now low tide, and Ronald was able to pass by the house dry-footed.

He looked in at the windows, but could see nothing to help him to a decision on the delicate question as to whether he might safely ask for Ida. He therefore determined to try the other side of the house, but he had no sooner reached the long narrow street on the other side which constitutes the village of Lowcliffe, than he felt his heart beat wildly as he caught sight of a figure, too far off to be recognisable by the eye, but which an unerring instinct told him was the woman he loved.

In the first moment of their meeting Ida was pleased that he should have so promptly answered her letter by coming in person, but the next moment she told him how inconvenient it was.

"Why did you come when I did not tell you to?" she asked.

"Because I knew there was a chance of seeing you, and I could not stay away."

"But my sister is here, and I don't want her to see you; she might speak about it."

"Then, good bye, darling. There is no train back to town to-night, but I will keep close in my hotel and leave as early as possible to-morrow."

His readiness to obey her wishes softened her.

"Well, it is rather a pity you came, but since you are here we must make the best of it," she said; "I will tell Kate I met you, and asked you to dine with us. Of course you will come, and you must be very careful, for I would not even

have her suspect that you even admire me. You must say what you can to account for your presence in this little village, and remember you must leave before eleven."

Though Ronald was not quite pleased with his reception, still he was to dine with her, and that was well worth coming to Lowcliffe for. But somehow the dinner was a failure. Mrs. Huntingdon was tired, and did not feel inclined to talk much, and the very indifferent *cuisine* which they had to put up with annoyed her. Then Ronald could not help feeling that Lady Atherley was particularly cold and distant in her manner, and although he tried to persuade himself that this coldness was due entirely to her desire to disarm every suspicion which might be entertained by her sister, yet he could not avoid the unpleasant thought that she would rather he had stayed away. The night was sultry and the sky overcast, and it was evident that a storm was impending. Mrs. Huntingdon proposed a short walk by the sea, but the ladies had only just had time to put on their bonnets when the rain began to fall in large isolated drops. All three felt disappointed at losing their walk, and the disappointment added to that tension of the nerves which so many people experience in an atmosphere highly charged with electricity.

The evening dragged along slowly, and for the first time Lady Atherley and her lover felt a tinge of *ennui* in each other's presence. Accordingly, shortly after ten o'clock, Ronald said "good-night." A maid went to the door with him to show him out, and lock up the house after him, but just as she opened the door, Mrs. Huntingdon called out to her: "Mary, come quickly, I have upset a flower-vase."

The girl immediately ran away for a duster, leaving Ronald standing on the threshold. Suddenly an idea flashed across him; he noticed a large cupboard door beside him, and without realising the situation he slammed the front door, and entering the cupboard he closed the door of it and waited. In a few minutes the girl returned, and he heard the bolts being fastened and the chain put up on the front door. After waiting about an hour the sounds in the house became hushed, and he

felt satisfied that all its inmates had retired to rest. He had noticed out of which room Ida came when she went downstairs after putting her bonnet on. Creeping softly upstairs, he listened carefully at her door, fearful lest her maid might be with her, and in a few moments he was satisfied that Ida was alone. Opening the door suddenly he stepped into the room. Lady Atherley, who was brushing her hair, turned round sharply, and could scarcely repress an exclamation of fear.

Ronald put his fingers to his lips.

"Take care," he said quietly, "you may alarm the house."

"Let it be alarmed. What right have you to come into my room like this?"

For a moment Ronald was silent. She looked so lovely as she stood there, in her light-blue flannel and satin dressing-gown, her eyes flashing with indignation, her rich hair waving over her shoulders, that the young man stood as if transfixed, not realizing the rash and unpardonable act that he had committed. At last recovering himself he said:

"I know that I have no right to see or speak to you; that everything to do with my undying devotion for you is not right, but miserably wrong; but—but—I cannot help it."

"Speak not of undying devotion. How you have come in, I know not; but this I know, that it is cowardly of you to come like a thief, yes, like a thief in the night, and rob me of my reputation. You cannot leave the house without alarming some one, and my name will be compromised by you. Have you bribed a servant in order to effect an entrance here?"

"Not a soul knows of my presence in this house, except yourself."

He spoke with an accent of suffering, sadness, and patience. His low spirits weighed her down. They felt like a heavy weight on her bosom, which her breathing could scarcely remove. A feeling of discomfort, a vague feeling of pain, spread itself all through her being and enervated her, took from her all her vital energy, destroyed in her every wish to move, and kept her crushed, bowed down, and without strength to rise and shake it off.

At last she seemed to take pity on him and said, more calmly and as if resigned to the inevitable:

"But you will never be able to leave the house un-

noticed. The doors are locked, and every bolt is rusty and creaks violently on the slightest movement."

"I have thought of that. I can go by this window. The verandah is only a few feet below it, so that I can step on to it, slide down one of the pillars, pass down the garden, and so on to the sea shore. The night is dark as pitch, and no one can see me."

"You might fall and be hurt."

"There is no danger of that; besides, a small risk like that is worth running for the sake of being with you alone."

"Yes; but if you were so hurt that you could not get away without assistance, how would things look then?"

Ronald felt disappointed. He imagined that her solicitude had been all on his account; now he found that it was on her own.

"I will be very careful," he said.

A footstep was heard in the passage.

"Good God! my sister. I am lost!" exclaimed Lady Atherley.

"Keep the door for half a minute," he whispered, "and all will be well."

The window was wide open, and he swung himself out on to the verandah. The rain had made the ironwork upon it very slippery; he lost his footing and fell to the ground. Ida heard the thud of his body as she opened her door, but the noise of the waves and the howling of the wind prevented the sound reaching Mrs. Huntingdon's ears.

"How white you look, Connie," she said. "Are you feeling ill?"

"Oh, it is nothing but the storm, I think. It has given me a headache, and I want to go to sleep."

Mrs. Huntingdon, who had come for a talk, only waited a very few minutes and then retired to her room. As soon as she was gone Ida rushed to the window, half fearing that she would see her lover lying on the ground, but when her eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the darkness she saw that he was gone.

The height which Ronald had fallen was not above twelve or fifteen feet. Though he was rather shaken he was not seriously hurt, and he fully realized the

necessity of immediately getting away. Creeping stealthily down the garden he let himself drop over the wall at the end. To his surprise he found himself in about two feet of water, for the tide was high, and the storm had driven the water rather far in. In the confusion caused by his fall, he had turned to the right instead of to the left on dropping from the garden wall, so that it seemed to him that he would never come to the end of the wall. Besides this, the waves made it extremely difficult for him to walk, and caused him to stumble against the masonry. He therefore moved a few feet out from it, and suddenly plunged over a small ledge of shingle into deep water.

It was some minutes before he regained sufficient presence of mind to try and gain the beach, but on turning towards the shore he found that he was considerably farther out than he supposed. The fact was that the tide was now running out, and the wind having suddenly dropped, he had been carried out some little distance. Pulling himself together, he "trod water" for a short time while he took a look at the situation. There was now a break in the clouds, and consequently there was just light enough for him to discover the mistake he had made in the direction he had taken at first starting.

He struck out for the shore, but after swimming for about ten minutes he was surprised to find that he had scarcely advanced as many yards towards the beach, although the houses were now at some short distance on his right.

"This is getting serious," thought Ronald, as he recognised the fact that he was tired, and that his clothes were impeding him sadly, "but I must make an effort for it," and he struck out vigorously again.

The sea was running pretty high, and as he rose to the top of one of the waves he saw a large black-looking object looming through the darkness at a short distance from him.

With a few steady strokes he reached it, and was glad to find that it was the jetty. Feeling very much exhausted, he seized one of the beams, intending to rest before climbing on to it; but the waves were so powerful that he found it would be unwise to delay reaching

the shore. He therefore clambered up the beams and soon stood upon the top.

His fall in the garden and the exertion he had undergone caused his limbs to tremble so violently that he felt unable to walk, and he was constrained to lie down and rest. Though he did not lose consciousness altogether, it was nearly half an hour before he could regain his feet. The night was warm, and the wind had completely fallen; but still Ronald felt cold and shaky, and it was with no little difficulty that he made his way to the hotel.

The old waiter, who had been ordered to sit up for him and had fallen asleep in a chair, was roused with some difficulty, and in his somnolent condition he easily accepted Ronald's explanation that he had lost his way and got drenched in the storm.

After a restless night Ronald rose early. He felt feverish, and the thought of his last night's adventure did not tend to calm his excited nerves. Thinking that Ida might be somewhat anxious about him, he wrote her an amusing account of his adventure, suppressing anything serious in it, and dwelling on its ludicrous aspect. In conclusion, he told her that he would return to town by the twelve o'clock train, and that he would not call to see her unless she sent him word to come.

Lady Atherley was dressing when the letter came, and seeing that it was rather long she put it aside unread until she was ready for breakfast. Then as she went into the dining-room she saw the boy who had brought it waiting in the passage.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Please m'm, I was told to wait for an answer to t' letter I brot."

"I can't send one now," she said, turning to the maid who was bringing in the coffee, "or my breakfast will get cold."

The boy ran back to the hotel and repeated her remark to Ronald, who had been anxiously awaiting his return. The message stung him sorely—an hour later he wrote again thus—

"If you have finished breakfast you may be able to

find time to let me know if I may come and see you before I start. I don't ask for a letter, but just take the enclosed pencil and write 'yes' or 'no' upon this envelope and send it back."

This time she answered :—

"GOOD-BYE, *cher ami*. Sorry you could only stay so short a time. I expect we shall leave to-morrow. I will try and find time to send you a letter now and then during our cruise, but you know I hate writing."

With a heavy heart Ronald returned to town.

He had scarcely reached his office when Fausterley came in.

"What has happened to you? you look as white as a sheet."

"I am tired, I had a bad night last night, and I have just come up from Lowcliffe by a horribly slow train."

"I congratulate you," said Fausterley, after hearing the object of Ronald's trip to the sea-side, "for with such an appearance as you present to-day, I am sure you must be completely happy."

"You are completely wrong."

"What nonsense—why should you make a mystery with me?"

"I make no mystery"—and Ronald told his story.

"Poor old fellow," said Fausterley, after hearing the account of his friend's troubles; "I'll tell you what it is, the woman is a brute, and you must give her up. Forgive my plain speaking," he continued, for he saw that Macleod resented the epithet he had applied to Lady Atherley; "it is better you should look the thing straight in the face. The woman does not love you; if she did, she could not treat you so."

"My reason tells me you are right," answered Ronald, dejectedly; "and why should she love me, because I have adored and treated her chivalrously? With some women that might suffice, but I have yet to learn how to win her."

"Yes; and is she worth the trouble? You have two courses open to you: either you can give her up and never see her again, and if you listen to

your reason that is the course you will adopt, or if this miserable passion of yours is too strong for you, as I fear it is, you must be harsh and apparently indifferent to her. It has often been said that the best way to secure the affection of either a woman or a dog is to use a stick freely, and I believe that, figuratively speaking (perhaps in some ranks of life literally), this is true of some women. From what you tell me of Lady Atherley, I can fancy she is one of those women—at least you can try harshness with her, for you cannot be worse off than you are present, and it may lead to the results you desire.”

“But I could not do it. I have always been so gentle and tender towards her that I could not alter my behaviour. Oh, Fausterley, you don’t know how I love her. At this moment, when I am smarting from the last blow she has inflicted upon me—when I feel heartsore and life-sick—there is no sacrifice which she could demand of me in vain, though I believe that her only reason for leading me on to love her so madly has been a mere caprice—a woman’s love of dominion—a despicable feeling of selfish vanity if you will, which causes her to trample upon me for the mere satisfaction which this knowledge of her power brings to her self-love. Yet, if she asked me to risk my life, nay; more, my honour, for her, I should cheerfully consent.”

“I say, old chap, I had no idea you were as bad as this. You look awfully ill, too. Come and have a liquor, and it will pull you together.”

“No, thanks, a liquor won’t help me; besides, I have lots of work to get through. This cursed passion of mine has made me but an indifferent man of business lately, and I am quite ashamed when I think how good my partners have been to me, and how I have shirked my duty. But I mean to stick to it now. She will leave England in a day or two, I suppose, and while she is away I shall work hard and try to keep her out of my thoughts.”

And Ronald really carried out this intention. Day after day he turned over his letters with a trembling hand, and day after day he experienced the same disappointment. Then he would sit down to his desk

and work steadily for hours. One day Mr. Thompson spoke to him about his zeal and energy.

"I am so glad to think that you are getting over the disappointment of your defeat," he said, kindly. "I had begun to fear that Mr. Pilsener had not only deprived the House of Commons of an ardent Conservative, but that he had also succeeded in injuring our business by robbing you of all your energy, but I am happy to see that whatever loss he may have caused to the country you are determined that we shall not suffer."

At last, one morning, when he had quite given up all hope of hearing from Ida, and when he had led himself to believe that he would manfully strive to subdue his unworthy passion for her, a letter in her well-known handwriting was handed to him. As his eyes fell upon it he felt as though he had experienced an electric shock. The envelope proved to be gummed down along its whole length; and while Ronald's trembling hands strove ineffectually to open it, his heart beat so violently that he felt quite faint, and he almost wished she had not written to him. What did the letter contain? Was it life or death? At last he tore it open clumsily, so that the envelope was reduced to shapeless fragments, and its contents all crumpled. But the letter was kind. It began with a plausible excuse for not writing:—

"You won't be angry with me, will you, now? for I have been out of humanity's reach so long that it was difficult to write; and then the weather has been rather rough, and more than all this, I felt that I did not like to write until I could tell you where to direct an answer. Even now I can't tell you where to write, so that you see I am really very good to write when I know I can't hear from you in return."

Then she spoke of their last meeting. She knew he would think she had been unkind about it, but it was not that she was unfeeling, but with her sister there—she was sure his tact would enable him to understand.

Ronald was radiant, he hastened off at once to Fausterley, and before giving him time to ask any questions he put the letter into his hand.

"Read that," he cried, joyfully, "you must own you have wronged her, and that she is not so heartless as you thought."

"Yes," said Fausterley, when he had read it, "that is a very nice letter, and there is more feeling in it than I should have given her credit for, and I am awfully glad, for your sake, for either she must care for you, or else she is sick of being cooped up in the yacht with the same people for three weeks, and is only writing as a sort of distraction."

"I shall accept the first hypothesis; it is the more agreeable of the two."

"Yes, and I think it is, on the whole, the more likely."

"Thanks. Come and drink her health."

In a moment all Ronald's good resolutions about not seeing her again were gone, he felt that he was more completely her slave than ever, and he longed to be able to write and tell her how unjustly he had judged her. Which of Fausterley's hypotheses was the true one? Lady Atherley could not have told if she had been asked. It was certain that she had not thought about Ronald at all during the first few days of her cruise, but then the Prince had been so amusing, and she had had so much to quarrel and make friends about with Captain Greville; and on the other hand, after the novelty of her situation had worn off, she had thought of Ronald very kindly. She had taken his first letter written at Lowcliffe with her, and when she re-read it and recognised, in spite of the light badinage of its tone, the danger in which he had been, two tears stood in her eyes ready to fall upon the paper; and when she remembered how fondly he loved her, and how passionately he had told her so, the tears rolled silently down her cheeks, and she felt that she must write to him and make some amends for her past conduct.

CHAPTER XVII.

MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS A-CHASING THE DEER.

It was now September. Ronald, whose pride had been deeply wounded by the coldness which Ida had shown him at Lowcliffe, had worked hard and steadily ever since his return from that ill-starred visit; and what with the distraction which his business afforded him, and the hope which he had gathered from two or three kind letters he had received from her since she was in Norway, the future smiled for him once more.

Ella had started with her children for the North, and the pure Highland air was doing much to dispel the unhealthy atmosphere which had begun to surround her friendship for Fausterley. Ronald, fond as he was of the grouse, had waited till he could enjoy some more varied shooting; but as soon as "the little brown birds" might lawfully be slaughtered, he too had gone to the far North.

It was a glorious morning. Ronald and his brother, with whom he was staying, had been asked over for a day's shooting by a rich American who had hired a large tract of country at an almost fabulous price, but who was rather a novice in all matters connected with sport. As soon as full justice had been done to one of those breakfasts which are never met with out of the "land o' cakes" the servants announced that the dog-cart was ready at the door.

"Why, you are not going out shooting in those things?" said Ian Macleod, noticing that Ronald had on a very neat pair of shoes.

"No; of course not. I am going to put on my boots now."

"Look sharp, then, the mare won't stand, and here's Murray dying to be off. Why couldn't you eat your breakfast with your boots on? I should think they were quite as comfortable as those dancing pumps."

"Yes, but I knew Edith would be down to breakfast, and——"

"Good Lord! how living in London spoils a man; but don't stand talking about it any longer, or Murray will be off without you."

"I'm not quite so bad as all that, although I haven't fired a shot for three years, and therefore I shan't be sorry to blaze away to-day," said Captain Murray, another of Ian Macleod's guests.

Ronald saw that he was causing some impatience, and hurried from the room; he had not been in his room two minutes, when his brother came up to him with a letter.

"Now, then, don't bother about reading this now," said he, "you will have time enough for it during the drive."

It was a letter from Ida. How could Ronald put it aside, even for a moment?

"Just see if my gun is in the trap, Ian, and I'll be down before you can get the reins in your hands."

The elder brother left the room, and Ronald instantly locked the door upon him. Then tearing open the envelope, he glanced through the letter rapidly, skipping half the words. He saw enough to know that the letter was very kind, and that the yachting party were back in town for a couple of days, to refit before going to the Mediterranean. "A letter by return, to No. 55, will catch me, but don't write unless you can post it the day you receive this."

How Ronald mentally cursed the shooting party, fond as he was of sport. He must write at all hazards. Taking a pen, he hastily directed an envelope to Lady Atherley, put a sheet of paper inside, and thrust it into his pocket.

"Now, then, Ronald; we're off," shouted Ian, and, cracking his whip, he drove the dog-cart round the grass-plot in front of the door.

Hearing the grinding of the wheels upon the gravel, Ronald thought his brother's patience was really exhausted, so, seizing his boots and gaiters, he sprang downstairs four steps at a time, rushed across the grass-plot in his stockings, and jumped into the trap.

"He's a long time getting away at the start, but he

comes in well at the finish," said Ian. "By Jove, Ronald, when you were turned out for Sandborough the House lost one of its most active members."

"You don't know that it has lost my services yet; haven't you heard that the party talks of presenting a petition against Mr. Pilsener for bribery? As you say, I am a long time getting away at the start, but I may still come in well at the finish."

"Well, I hope that if you do you will be clothed and in your right mind, and not in your present condition," and the three men laughed heartily as Ronald struggled with his boots and gaiters at the imminent risk of being jolted out of the cart, so easy is it to laugh on a fine September morning in the Highlands.

The sun was shining brightly through the trees, which formed an overhanging canopy over the road, gilding with a richer gold the pale yellow of those leaves which were already beginning to turn, and lighting up the heather with its myriad gems of sparkling dew. The mountain mists in shadowy wreaths were climbing slowly to the summits of the neighbouring hills. Now the road lay beside the rushing burn, where the speckled trout basked in the clear pools, or darting forward on rapid fin leapt the low falls clear out of the water. Farther on, as the road crossed higher ground, the trees disappeared, and the purple heather, trembling beneath the passing breeze, assumed a thousand varying tints.

Now some mountain hare, startled by the clattering hoofs of the horse, would rise suddenly from her form, and gliding stealthily along, with her ears well back upon her shoulders, continued her flight until the guns were well out of distance, and then squatted down for a moment before she passed out of sight over the brow of the hill. Again, some wise old grouse, gaining timely warning from the laughter of the sportsmen, would perch upon a moss-grown boulder, and from his watch-tower carefully calculated at what moment it would be safest to fly off with that derisive "kauk-kaw, kaw-rauk, kok-kok," so exasperating to the deer-stalker.

"You seem to have plenty of birds this year," said Captain Murray, as he followed one of them wistfully with his eyes.

"Yes, I am very lucky. The birds are rather wild, but there are plenty of them about here, though I hear very bad accounts of them from the country south of Inverness. But we must come and make a nearer acquaintance with some of these fellows to-morrow—that is, if Ronald can get his boots on after to-day's walk."

"All right, you may chaff me if you like, but wait till I get on the heather to-morrow and I'll show you whether we London men can't walk with the best of you, and, mind you, I shan't show you any mercy. Ten o'clock a.m. till six p.m., half an hour for lunch, and no shirking the tops of the hills."

"Oh, Lord! isn't he valiant to-day? I daresay he'll sing a different song when we take our "wee drappie" over the smoking room fire to-night. But I say, boys," continued Ian, "I want you to shoot your level best to-day, and show these Yankees what Highlanders can do."

Now, as the road dipped sharply to a lower level the heather was left behind, and the air was laden with the scent of the larch and bog myrtle. Soon the lodge gates were passed, and after another mile the dogcart was pulled up at the door of Djeanich Castle. Some six or seven gentlemen were standing about the door enjoying their morning cigars, and congratulating each other on the promising aspect of the weather. At about twenty yards off stood the keepers and gillies, some holding the gentlemen's guns, others leaning on their sticks and keeping the retrievers, while half a dozen couples of clumbers waddled about threatening to upset any unwary gillie who allowed them to come behind him, unheeded until the coupling leather was drawn taut across his calves.

As the Macleods vaulted down from the dog-cart, a pale, short man, with the pinched-looking features, so common to Americans, stepped hurriedly forward to greet them.

"Ah, here you are, Major Macleod," he said, holding out his hand cordially, "you're rather late, and I was gettin' anxious, you bet. I was just sayin' to Mrs. Boston, 'If the Major and his brother don't come, this thing'll be a failure, and we better just throw up the contract.'"

Major Macleod introduced his brother and his guest.

"Glad to see you, I'm sure, gentlemen, and if ever you come over to *the* country I'll show you a thing or two. You ask in Wall Street if they've heard of Hiram P. Boston, and they'll bet you a fifty dollar note to a red cent that I won't let you go away dissatisfied. But what's the good o' talkin' ? You come, that's all. And now," he continued, raising his voice, and taking a large decanter of whisky from a small iron table beside the door, "who's for a liquor before we start ?"

It was agreed that Major Macleod should take command of the party. Ronald should take the other end of the line, and the head keeper, walking in the centre, would endeavour to keep the guns in their places. The sportsmen now started at a leisurely pace down the avenue, followed by the keepers and beaters. Turning off soon by a little path to the right, they crossed a grass field and passed through a gate into a field of turnips. Here the guns were loaded and handed to their owners.

"Can anyone speak Dutch ?" asked Mr. Boston. There was a pause.

"Well, that's unlucky," he continued, "because Herr von Steudel has never seen a thing of this sort before, and I hoped some one would be able to kinder give him a hint now and again."

"I can speak German," said Ronald, "and I might be able to make him understand with that."

"Why, darned if that ain't the same thing. We always call it Dutch in the States.

Herr von Steudel was accordingly handed over to Ronald, and the line spread out along the edge of the field, a beater and a gun alternately. As our hero stood for a moment, waiting the signal to advance, he felt that his cup of happiness was full. That glorious crispness of the atmosphere which makes the mere consciousness of life a joy—the pleasurable expectation which even the oldest sportsman must feel the first morning that he takes his weapon into his hands—the knowledge that he had in his pocket a charming letter from Ida, and the now almost certain hope that he should one day win her—all combined to fill his soul with gladness unspeakable.

Major Macleod's whistle sounded.

"Forwards," shouted Ronald, and the line advanced.

Soon a rabbit darted between him and Herr von Steudel and reached a burrow before the latter could fire.

"Ach, what an unlucky beast to run that way instead of forwards," exclaimed the German, a very tall, sallow-faced man, with sandy hair, and wild blue eyes beaming through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles; who had arrayed himself in a black velvet hunting cap, a Norfolk jacket with checks the size of one's hand upon it, buck-skin breeches, and Hessian boots.

Shots were heard at the other end of the line.

"Never mind," said Ronald, "you will soon have another chance. Look, here comes a hare down towards us!"

Von Steudel raised his gun, but just before he got it to his shoulder his neighbour fired, and the hare rolled over like a ball. This did not prevent the German firing both his barrels at it.

"Did I hit it?" he asked.

"I think Mr. Hall had killed it before you fired."

"Oh, no! I assure you he still kicked."

"Well, you have stopped that," said Ronald, smiling, "then I will mark it in my book;" and he took out a pocket-book and wrote down "killed, 1 hare." At first Ronald was very careful not to fire at anything, when he thought his neighbour had a fair chance, but he soon found out that the result of this forbearance was likely to lessen the weight of the bag considerably. Besides, he soon noticed that the other men were not by any means inclined to emulate his example, for if anything got up in front of one of them, the guns on both sides were sure to be discharged at it, and, sometimes, as the gentlemen got more excited, they would fire at a covey of partridges even at a distance of 150 to 200 yards.

Von Steudel, who had not succeeded in shooting anything except the dead hare, was getting rather dispirited, when just as the party was crossing a narrow belt of trees between two fields whir-r-r-r rose a cock pheasant from under his feet.

"Warr faysan," shouted the beaters.

Von Steudel was so startled by the sound of the bird's wings that he fired his gun without getting it up to his shoulder. The pheasant, which had scarcely flown ten yards, fell to the ground, while a shower of feathers fluttered down in the German's face.

"An eagle," he cried, "I've shot an eagle," and dropping his gun, rushed forward and picked up his prize.

Holding it aloft, he laughed aloud with delight. "Oh, my friend," he said, seizing Ronald's hand, "have you seen what a quick shot—he is quite dead, and what a beautiful bird. I thought he was an eagle, but I must have him stuffed if I can find his head."

Ronald could not help laughing, as he explained that it was contrary to law to shoot pheasants in September, but Von Steudel was so pleased with his success that he persisted in treating Ronald's assurance as a piece of genial Scotch humour, and from this moment he became so exceedingly eager that he was constantly eight or ten yards in front of the rest of the line, and Ronald had continually to tell him that he would be shot.

The beat now lay through a rough piece of land, covered with whins and abounding in rabbits. The shooting became very brisk, and the excitement of the sportsmen spread to the beaters. Major Macleod was shooting very steadily, seldom missing anything.

"Mark, raabit; mark, raabit," shouted a gillie to him, excitedly; but, as the rabbit was close to the gillie's legs, Ian did not fire.

"Shoot, mon, shoot; och, why did ye no shoot?" yelled the man.

"Because I'm not shooting gillies to-day, and I couldn't have hit it without giving you a pellet or two."

"Och, there's no fear of me," answered the gillie, who, in the excitement of the moment, would not have shrunk from the chance of getting a pellet or two in his leg if he could only get a heavier bag than the man next him.

From the centre of the line came the cry,

"Mark hare gone back."

At this moment Von Steudel, tired of hearing Ronald's constant warnings to keep back, had dropped

a yard or two behind. A Mr. Carmine, son of the popular preacher, turned round suddenly and fired at the hare.

"Mein Gott, mein Gott," yelled the German, dropping his gun and flinging his arms wildly in the air—"I'm shotten, shotten, mein Gott!" and suddenly he fell to the ground.

"What the —— do you get in the way for, then?" shouted Mr. Carmine, rushing forward, his face white with terror, though he retained enough presence of mind to commence abusing his victim with the idea that he might lead the unfortunate man to suppose that the fault was entirely his own.

Ronald was at Von Steudel's side in a moment, and he soon found that the damage he had suffered was not great. One shot had passed into his left hand. Another had entered his leg, but it was visible close under the skin, and though two or three had struck his boots, they had not penetrated the leather. A good draught of the "wine of the country" restored Von Steudel's spirits, and he declared his intention of going on after lunch; but Mr. Carmine was so scared that it was with difficulty that Mr. Boston persuaded him to come on and have lunch with them, instead of returning at once to the castle.

Mr. Boston, who was anxious that he should be as well esteemed in the Highlands as in Wall Street, had prepared a gorgeous luncheon; a spot had been chosen in a small wood near where the accident had happened. Here some planks had been laid across tressles and covered with a clean cloth. Portable ovens and tubs of iced champagne had been sent out, and under the superintendence of a *chef* picked up in "Paree," a meal was set forth which would not have disgraced a London table in the height of the season. While the rest of the party were hastening to do justice to the good things of their host, Ronald contrived to slip away, and having read his letter again and again, he repeated each phrase, dwelling on those words which seemed most like promises of happiness, till he knew them by heart. Then he sat down and wrote in pencil an answer. His soul was so full of gladness and love, that he wrote words so passionate

that as he read them over again before closing the envelope, his pulses beat to a quicker measure.

Then he took her letter, and reading it for the last time he murmured, "Oh, my darling, how I thank you for this;" lighting a match, he set fire to the paper, taking a longing, lingering look at each word as it was consumed. Only the signature he kept, that name of Ida, by which he called her. That name which she kept for him alone was treasured up a little longer until at night before changing his dress for dinner, he should print one long last kiss upon it, and then commit it also to the flames.

Then he called one of the beaters and gave him the letter.

"Take this to the post-office at once," he said, "and if you can get back again with a note from the post-mistress to say you caught the post, you shall have five shillings."

Ronald then joined the party at lunch.

"What on earth have you been up to?" asked Ian. "I never saw such a chap as you are. Now just set to work and make up for lost time. I believe you have been taking off those swell gaiters of yours to wring the wet out of your stockings."

"And we know that putting on those boots is a matter of no small moment with him," said Murray.

"I'm not going to chaff with you fellows now, I have something better to do—but take care, I've got an awfully cutting remark ready for you when I've time to make it."

"Well, you have only ten minutes left before we start, so make the best of it," said Ian, lighting a cigar.

It was a curious party that Mr. Boston, with his large-hearted but not over-discriminating hospitality, had called together. In the course of his business or on his travels he met an immense number of people, and he issued invitations on the slightest provocation, and, as generally happens in such cases, the people who accepted them were scarcely as desirable as those who refused.

Von Steudel, after his copious draught of whisky, followed by an indefinite number of glasses of champagne,

had forgotten what few words of English he ever knew, and was therefore obliged to remain with Ronald, as no one else could understand him. He became very friendly, and told Ronald that if ever he came to Munich and would ask for him he should be glad to do the honours of that city, of whose governing body he was a prominent member. Ronald thanked him for his proffered hospitality, and gave him his card, hoping to see him in town.

Mr. Boston, ever looking out for everyone's comfort, was asking the gillies if they had had plenty.

"I was thinking the boys could eat some more, sir," said the head keeper.

"All right, Farquhar, there's an enormous pie containing half a sheep somewhere in reserve. That'll satisfy them."

"They got it, sir."

"And is it finished?"

"Indeed 'tis, sir; it jist went down like a pill."

"Wal, when I've time to make a contract with the nearest undertaker, they can have some more, but, in the meantime, it might be inconvenient, so off we go."

The party was soon once more in motion. The shooting had not been good before lunch, but now it became alarmingly wild. Even Ian Macleod, who was not accustomed to a heavy meal in the middle of the day, and who infinitely preferred a few sandwiches, a draught from a spring with a drop of whiskey in it, and a piece of cake to the sumptuous repast which had just been laid before him, made several misses, and Ronald and Murray were the only two who kept up anything like a fair average.

The beat now lay close to the sea shore. Suddenly a roe was seen to start from a thicket some 200 yards ahead of the line. Two guns were fired at it.

"Much too far off," shouted Ian Macleod. "Reserve your fire, gentlemen, and you will get a shot at her yet, as she will have to pass you before she can get to higher ground. Let two dogs go, Farquhar."

A couple of retrievers, which had been trembling with excitement, were unleashed, and running at their highest speed turned the roe back on to a narrow tongue of whin-covered land jutting into the sea.

"We have her," shouted Ian. "If four guns will go down and beat those whins she can't escape. There is hardly room for more than that." Captain Murray was told off to take a Dr. Warsol, Mr. Hall, and Mr. Waugh—the former a country doctor who had received a month's invitation to the Highlands in return for some slight assistance rendered to Mr. Boston's son, and the two latter fellow-passengers of that gentleman's on the occasion of his last trip from America. None of the three had ever been in Scotland before, and they were in a state of great excitement, as they believed they were now engaged in that celebrated sport—deer stalking.

While they advanced in a line stretching across the promontory, the remainder of the party stood in a group watching them. After a few minutes eight shots were heard in quick succession, and then the roe was seen running towards the extreme end of the land.

Suddenly she stopped short and turned back upon her pursuers, running between Captain Murray and the doctor. As she advanced towards him, Murray fired one barrel at her, and then, dubious of the doctor's presence of mind, threw himself flat on his face. It was well he did so, for the other three gentlemen all fired in his direction, and their shot went whizzing over him.

"She has escaped them all," said Ian; "what an infernal set of duffers."

"No," said Ronald, "I think she is hard hit; see how slowly she runs, and the dogs are at her heels. There; the dogs have her by the throat. It is all up with her."

"Who shot her?" asked Mr. Boston, as Murray's party returned.

"I think I hit her with my second shot," said Murray, "but I missed the first and the last."

"I hit her three times," said the Doctor.

"You deuced nearly hit me," said Murray, rather annoyed that he had missed such easy shots.

"I know I hit her twice if not three times," cried Mr. Waugh.

"And I saw the shot rattle on her and turn her fur up each time I fired," chimed in Mr. Hall, anxious to claim the prize.

A dispute seemed imminent.

"What shot were you using, Murray?" asked Ronald.

"Number six."

"Mine is Number four," said Mr. Hall.

"I had an S. S. G. cartridge in the last shot I fired, and Number five before that," said the Doctor.

"And I Number five all the time," chimed in Mr. Waugh.

"Well, let us make a sort of sweepstakes of it; we will each put a couple of sovereigns in and give one of the keepers a sovereign to search for the shot, and if it is No. 6 the stakes shall be taken by Captain Murray, if S. S. G., by the doctor, if No. 5 the Doctor and Mr. Waugh will divide the pool, and if No. 4 I shall claim it," pronounced Mr. Hall.

"Agreed," cried the others.

When the under-keeper had skinned and *grelloched* the beast, "Well," asked Mr. Boston, "who takes the pile?"

"The *puir baste* couldna run wi' sair idders, sir. She was caught by the dougs, and there was na a *pellat* in her hail bawdy."

This report was received with a hearty laugh, in which the whole party joined, and at night in the smoking-room chaff about Ronald's shoes was abandoned for jests about the running deer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BRIDE OF THE SEA.

RONALD had not been long back in London when he received a letter from Von Steudel. After many thanks for the kindness which Ronald had shown him at Mr. Boston's, and also during the two or three days which he had afterwards spent at Major Macleod's, he pro-

ceeded to ask Ronald's advice upon a matter of business.

The city of Munich required a loan of two millions sterling to complete some public works, and to consolidate the remnants of some former loans. The authorities were willing to pay five per cent. interest, and if they could find any house to guarantee the placing of the whole loan, they were willing to dispose of it *firm* at 97 or 98, leaving it to the discretion of the guarantors to issue it at whatever price they thought fit.

Ronald at once saw that this transaction would bring a certain gain of from £20,000 to £50,000 to any house undertaking it, for it was evident that in the present plethoric state of the money market the loan could be issued at least at par. Here was a way by which he could not only repay his partners for their goodness to him, but also clear himself of any debt due to them.

Trembling with excitement, he took the letter into Mr. Thompson's room. In a voice which it cost him a great effort to keep calm, he said, "Would you read that, and tell me what you think of it?"

Mr. Thompson took up a pair of spectacles which were lying on his desk, wiped them carefully, and, adjusting them on the end of his nose, read the letter attentively.

Ronald stood aside watching his partner's face, to see what effect the proposal would have upon him, but the old gentleman's expression remained perfectly stolid. When he came to the end of the letter, he turned it over and read it again. Then turning to Ronald, and looking at him over the top of his spectacles, he said: "My German is getting rather rusty; just translate it to me."

Ronald complied. When he had finished, Mr. Thompson rose from his seat, pressed Ronald's hand warmly, and said:

"Excellent; you must start for Munich to-night, or some one else may step in and get the business before us. You had better go home and pack up. I will talk to Haroldson, and telegraph to Baron Steudel and tell him to expect you on Wednesday morning."

A few hours after Ronald was steaming across the

Channel, resolutely keeping down the idea that the sea was rather rough with the thought that every plunge of the boat was diminishing the distance which lay between him and Venice, where Ida was to arrive that night, according to the last letter which he had received from her. "And Venice is not so very far from Munich," he thought, "and perhaps I might run over there after this business is settled and see her for one day."

At Cologne, where Ronald changed carriages, he entered a compartment in which a gentleman was sitting wrapped up in furs and apparently sleeping peacefully.

As soon as the train started Ronald put his feet upon the opposite cushion, wrapped his legs in an opossum rug and was soon deeply interested in a charming modern novel full of plot and passion.

His fellow-traveller now opened his eyes, but directly they fell upon Ronald he closed them again with an involuntary start. Then opening them again slowly, he fixed them steadily upon him with an expression of such deadly hate that had Ronald turned his head he would hardly have been able to resume his reading with any degree of comfort.

For fully five minutes the stranger glared fixedly at him, while his hand stole gently into his pocket and grasped a small revolver. Then the murderous expression faded from his face, and he turned in his seat.

"Have you any objection to my smoking?" asked Ronald, who had been longing for a cigar, but had been unwilling to light one while his fellow traveller was asleep.

"On the contrary. I should be smoking myself if I had not emptied my cigar case."

Ronald fancied he recognised the voice, though he could not tell where he had heard it, and the stranger's face was so much hidden by the fur travelling cap which he had buttoned under his chin that it was not easy to recognise him.

"Let me offer you one."

"Thank you, Mr. Macleod."

"Ah, you know my name. You have the advantage of me."

"Then I will meet you on more even terms," and, with a little laugh, he unbuttoned his cap, and disclosed the Jewish features of Mr. Pilsener.

With the instinctive dislike which Ronald felt for this man, he was inclined to turn his back on him, but reflecting that perhaps it was the fact of their having been adversaries at Sandborough which had prejudiced him against Mr. Pilsener, he strove to overcome a feeling which he regarded as ungenerous and unreasonable. He therefore entered into conversation with him. After speaking upon various topics,—

"By the way," asked Mr. Pilsener, "is it true that you and your friends are really going to present a petition against my return and claim the seat if successful?"

"Quite true; have you not had notice of it?"

"Yes, I heard something about it; how are you getting on? Do you feel sanguine about it?"

"Tolerably. I have heard but little about it lately, as I have been away shooting in the north."

"Do you know, I think it very unwise."

"Possibly; you are welcome to that opinion."

"But looking at it dispassionately, is it not a pity that you and I should spend a quantity of money for the benefit of the legal gentlemen, who are sure to make a handsome picking out of us, whichever way the petition is decided?"

"It won't cost me anything, for the leading Conservatives are determined to see me through with it, and they very rightly think I have spent quite enough out of my private purse in contesting the election for them."

"Yes, that must have cost you a good deal. I cannot help thinking, however, it is a great pity that so much more money should be spent upon this affair—why I expect the petition will cost me close on £10,000 from first to last, and though I am sure of the seat, that is a great deal to pay for it. Do you know," added the Jew, speaking slowly, and watching Ronald narrowly as he spoke, "that I would be willing to pay £7,000 down on the nail to cover the expenses of the petitioners if they would withdraw."

Ronald was silent.

"£7,000 did I say?" continued Mr. Pilsener, while his eyes seemed to plunge their eager glances into Ronald's heart. "I know you and your party must have spent a good deal, but I should think £8,000 would cover it."

Ronald was still silent.

"Well, I was saying that the whole thing might cost me £10,000 from first to last. It is better to know the worst at once than to have something indefinite to pay, and then of course, it would save a lot of trouble and worry. Yes, I would even give £10,000 to know that the petition was withdrawn."

Ronald was turning over the leaves of his book.

"What do you think, Mr. Macleod?" asked the Jew eagerly, after pausing some seconds for a reply.

"I think," answered Ronald, fiercely, "that a man who takes a bribe is a d——, contemptible scoundrel, and that the man who offers one should be classed in the same category."

The expression of Mr. Pilsener's face was not pleasant to be seen.

"Your remark seems to me to be entirely beside the question," he said, with difficulty restraining his passion, while his hand played once more with the revolver in his pocket.

"That is possible, but I have no wish to pursue the discussion, which is extremely uninteresting to me," and Ronald leaned back in his seat, and commenced to read again, but it was some time before the delightful story he was perusing removed the expression of contempt which had settled on his features.

Mr. Pilsener winced beneath Ronald's words as if he had received a cut across the face with a horsewhip.

When next the train stopped, he left the carriage. As he was getting out, he said: "I am sorry you should have misunderstood me, but I daresay that the fact of my not being an Englishman by birth leads me occasionally to employ terms in such a manner as to mislead, and I therefore think it only right to say that I sincerely regret having said anything to vex you."

"Oh, it's all right about that."

"Good-bye," said Pilsener, holding out his hand, but Ronald, who was still reading, contrived not to notice it. "Good-bye," he said, coldly.

"Thank goodness he's gone," murmured Ronald to himself; "d—— the brute; offering to bribe me."

"You shall pay me for this," thought the Jew. "I have thwarted you successfully once; it shall not be the last time."

When Macleod arrived at Munich his first proceeding after securing rooms at the Hotel de Bavière, was to seek out Baron von Steudel.

The baron received him kindly, talked with evident pleasure of his visit to the Highlands, and discussed the proposed loan. A committee of the Municipal Council had been appointed to negotiate the loan, and he, Von Steudel, was chairman of that committee.

"I think you will have to give 97½ per cent., as there will be some competition for it, and a French banker as well as a representative of another English house have been invited to tender for it. Of course, you can count upon my influence in your favour, provided you tender as high as the others. The French banker only arrives to-morrow, and I did not expect you could be here so soon, so that I have fixed Monday for the next meeting of the committee. You will therefore have time to see the beauties of Munich before you need trouble yourself about business."

"Nothing can be done till Monday," thought Ronald, "and I am within a day's journey of Venice and of Ida."

As soon as he could decently take his leave of Von Steudel he returned to his hotel.

He felt that perhaps he might employ his time well in getting introduced to some of the Baron's colleagues, but very likely that would do no good, and the idea that he might once more see Ida was too great a temptation to be resisted. His long absence from her, the very memory of the disappointment of his last visit to her at Lowcliffe, added to the thought that all her letters since then had given him an almost certainty that he might wipe out that disagreeable memory and perhaps substitute a happy one for it—all combined to form a temptation far beyond his strength to resist.

By six o'clock Ronald was in the train, travelling towards the Brenner, which separated him from Italy and Ida. As the train mounted the steep inclines towards the top of the pass, his spirits seemed to rise the higher he went. But while Ronald was travelling to Venice, Mr. Pilsener had not been idle. On his arrival in Munich, he had almost immediately called upon one of the members of the Municipal Council, who had written to ask him if he would be disposed to tender for the loan. He, too, heard that Monsieur Vauthier, a French banker, and a representative of the house of Thompson and Haroldson were expected to meet the committee on the following Monday. But, unlike Ronald, he did not waste the time which intervened between his arrival and the meeting of the committee. On the contrary, he got his friend to write him a letter of introduction to his colleagues, and finding that some of them were in Munich, and that those who were absent were not far away, he managed to call upon them all.

In his conversations with these gentlemen he ignored the object of his visit altogether, but spoke to them upon various subjects, drawing them out skilfully until he had learned what was the particular hobby of each. One member of the committee, a gentleman of great artistic taste, and an enthusiastic admirer of Italian art, asked him to dinner. Mr. Pilsener accepted with effusion. All dinner time the conversation fell upon art topics, and the host alluded with great pride to many of the works of art adorning the walls of his dining-room.

"Ah, what a grand opportunity you have of studying art here in your beautiful city of Munich," said the Jew, as he sipped his "Liebfrauenmilch;" "really I often think seriously of settling down here or at least making it my head-quarters, so that I may be near your marvellous Pinakothek."

"Well, for my part, I think there is no collection that equals it, but as a Municher I am perhaps prejudiced, and then, too, I have never seen your National Gallery in London."

"As for that, it is not to be compared to your collection. But do you know, it strikes me as odd that

the only example you have here of that inimitable portrait painter, Paris Bordone, is spurious."

"I am aware of that, and though it is described as an original in the catalogue, that is an error, for it is well known to be a copy only; but my dear sir, you must remember that Bordones are not to be found every day."

"No, they are rare, and yet in my poor little collection I have a very fine one."

"You are indeed fortunate. I would give a year of my life to have one, even in the public gallery here, but to possess one—ah!" and Herr Dekker drew a long breath.

"And yet it is easy enough," said the Jew, quietly. "You see that nude figure there in the corner," he continued, pointing to a small picture of Pandora by a modern French artist; "now that picture has taken my fancy immensely, and if you care to do it I shall be glad to give you my Bordone for it—that is, provided you like my picture when you see it, for I will send for it to-night."

"But what are you thinking of, my dear Mr. Pilsener? This is a picture by a living French artist, who will paint you any number you like for four or five thousand francs; but a Bordone—my dear sir, it is madness!"

"Well, you can see the picture in a few days, and I assure you you will oblige me greatly if you will make the exchange, for that Pandora is charming, and I have quite made up my mind to have it."

Herr Dekker's delight was boundless. He could not restrain himself for joy, but, rising from his seat, he came forward, and, clasping his guest in his arms, he imprinted a sounding kiss on each of the Jew's chubby cheeks, while his eyes filled with moisture. Mr. Pilsener felt that the time had come to introduce the subject of the loan, and as he left the house that night he felt that one vote at least was certain in his favour.

With the next gentleman that he called on he soon found that it was unnecessary to be delicate or cautious. Herr Markel was a blunt coarse-featured man, who offered him some excellent wine, of which he partook largely himself.

"I thought it was likely you would call upon me,"

he said, "and I made up my mind to tell you, as I shall tell the others, that I am a man of business, and that I always like people to call a spade a spade."

"Give me your hand, sir, you are a man after my own heart. I hate people who beat about the bush; and now I will tell you that I have come to try if I cannot induce you to support my application for the whole of this loan you are about to issue, but before going any further I must ask you to give me another glass of this delicious wine."

"With pleasure. I see you are a connoisseur of wine."

"Thank you! and now I was only about to say that if I succeed in getting the loan, you may count upon my gratitude," and Pilsener looked meaningly at Herr Markel.

"Gratitude," said the other, "is doubtless a very beautiful quality, but I am no philosopher, and I do not care for abstract virtues."

"But there is no reason why this particular virtue should not become concrete."

"*Freilich!* But," continued Herr Markel, tapping the side of his ruby-coloured nose with his fat forefinger, "I am of an inquiring turn of mind, and I should like to know what shape it might assume."

"Since you are an amateur of wines, a *pot de vin* might be appropriate."

"Capital, capital!" laughed Herr Markel. "But though I know you will think I am a walking sign of interrogation, I must ask you what this *pot de vin* will consist of?"

"Twenty per cent. more than those offered by the other gentlemen."

"Another glass, Mr. Pilsener, to drink success to your enterprise! I am with you, and I promise you I will do my best for you."

Thus the wily Jew passed from one committee man to another, till by the time the day of meeting came he had promises from five out of the nine that they would give him the loan provided he tendered for it on equal terms to those offered by the other two financiers.

Meanwhile Ronald sped upon his journey. As the night fell he managed to gain a few hours of fitful

sleep, but when the dawn rose and the sun shone in upon him he threw off his drowsiness ; and the thought that he should see Ida that very day drove away his fatigue, like the morning mists before that sun which was not to set until he had once more spoken to her—perhaps clasped her to his heart.

Onward rolled the train, past the lovely hills of Adio Peri Ceramo, stopping (how unnecessarily long, thought Ronald) at Verona. But at last the day passed, and as the sun began to set the train ran along the viaduct which leads across the Lagune to Venice. To any traveller, whether bent on business or pleasure, that first sight of the City of Palaces rising out of the water in the waning sunlight like some fairy structure, in the tales of his childhood, must cause a deep and ineffaceable impression. But on Ronald, who saw in the wondrous pile before him only the costly casket holding for him a jewel of inestimable value, this first sight of the queenly city fell like some vision of a brighter world.

So great was his emotion that it was with the greatest difficulty he could force himself to give the necessary directions for the removal of his luggage and step into a gondola—fitting vehicle for one bent upon his errand.

Lady Atherley's letter to him mentioned that she would go to Damieli's, and he had intended to stay at that hotel, but as the gondola glided over the water a sort of indefinable weakness seemed to creep over his spirit—a vague dread of the happiness for which he had so ardently longed, and a childish desire to prolong the pleasures of anticipation yet an hour or two.

"Are we near Damieli's?" he asked of the gondolier, a tall, lithe-looking fellow, with a slouched felt hat, a check flannel shirt, a pair of canvas trousers, and a face well fitted to make school girls dream.

"Not far, signor ; not far. Don't fear, I shall not let you languish on the way. My gondola shall be the first at the hotel, and the signor shall be in time for the *table d'hôte*," and he commenced a bright, lively song, to which the plashing of the oar made a musical accompaniment.

"And this building, what is it?"

"The Grand Hotel—a good house, I hear, but not quite such a favourite with the English as Damieli's."

"I will try it. Stop here."

When Ronald had changed his clothes and dined, he started for Damieli's. Suddenly it occurred to him that it was very late to ask for Lady Atherley, and that such a course might be disagreeable to her. He therefore returned to his hotel and wrote a note to her.

"I AM here," it said. "If it is in any way possible, let me see you to-night. If you think that unwise, then send me a line by the bearer to say what is the earliest hour at which I can call in the morning."

Taking this letter with him, he called a gondolier and went to Damieli's. Waiting in the gondola, he sent the man to the hotel with the letter. In a few minutes he returned. As he came through the gathering darkness Ronald's heart beat so violently that he felt he could hardly bear to wait till the man reached him.

"The lady is not in the hotel, signor."

Ronald started up as if he had been shot.

"What! Is she not staying there?"

"Yes, signor, but she is not there **in the moment.**"

"Perhaps she is at some theatre."

"Very probable."

"Then take me to the chief theatre."

The gondola was soon threading its way through the little canals leading to Le Fenice.

The play had commenced some time, and Ronald, who spoke Italian but indifferently, soon found the fatigue of his journey telling upon him, and after looking carefully at each *loggia*, and finding to his disappointment that Ida was not there, he soon fell asleep. After some moments he began to attract attention in the audience.

"Look at that beast of an Englishman," said a young Italian girl to an elderly woman. "He is so drunk he can hardly stay in his seat. What a waste of money to pay for a place and not to see more of the acting than that."

"Ah! these Englishmen always have lots of money

to waste," answered the old woman, and she watched him intently for some time.

"Ignazio," she said, suddenly turning to a young fellow of some two and twenty years of age, "see that Englishman; he must have gold enough to spare some for us." And she whispered to him for some time.

When the next act was over, Ronald, who had been awakened by the bravos of the audience, felt that he had had enough of the theatre, and strolled out into the narrow streets which surround it. Presently he found himself in the Piazza of St. Marco; he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful before; "and to think she is in the same town with me, and that perhaps this very day she has crossed this Piazza—this day her eyes may have rested on those marvellous cupolas—and to-morrow, when a few short hours shall have passed, I may be standing here with her by my side."

A young man, with a long pipe in his mouth, passed him rapidly. Ronald turned and looked at him. "What an odd fellow that is," he thought, "I have seen him pass me two or three times to-night, and, though he seems in a hurry, I always catch him up again."

Ronald walked on to the Piazzetta, and stood between the columns of St. Mark and St. George. In front of him the broad *canale di St. Marco* stretched away like some sheet of silver, bounded by the shadowy structures of the Isola di Giorgio Maggiore. Towards the right the marble dome of La Salute glinting in the moonlight seemed to sit upon the water like a gigantic bubble ready to be blown away should the slightest breeze spring up. On his left the ducal palace, its red walls softened to a delicate pink beneath the bright rays of the moon, rose proudly against the deep blue of the sky, while its shadow, like some inky pool upon the white stones of the Piazzetta, seemed to flow towards Ronald as he stood entranced by the beauty of the scene.

Suddenly the sound of a rapid step awakened him from his reverie, and turning quickly he saw the young man who had passed him seven times before moving quickly towards him. Ronald remembered the Italian proverb which says "Be careful how you stand

between the columns of the Piazzeta," and seeing that he was alone with the stranger he instinctively drew himself up and clenched his fists, ready to fell the man with a blow if he should attempt robbery.

But Ignazio—for it was he who had been following Ronald, said—in a low tone, as he passed by, "I have a message for you, signor, from a lady," and he strode on to the edge of the water.

A message from a lady—there could only be one lady in Venice who would send him one, but how could this man know where to find him? He followed Ignazio, who was standing gazing into the canal.

"What is your message?"

"That the lady wishes to see you at once."

"Where—at her hotel?"

"No, I will conduct you."

"And what sort of a lady is it, and how did you know where to find me?"

"It is a beautiful lady; she saw you in the theatre, and told me to go to you; but you went out, and then I followed you."

"But why did you not speak to me before?"

"Ah, Signor, I am more discreet than that."

"Is it a tall lady with rich, red brown hair?"

"Yes, yes, just that."

"Lead, then. I will follow."

Threading a number of narrow alleys, now between tall houses which seemed to meet overhead, and now between stagnant canals, Ignazio stopped at last in one of the meanest-looking streets and tapped at a door.

Ronald hesitated. "Surely the lady does not live here in this wretched place," he said.

"Oh, Signor, this is the back entrance. The front is on the canal, and is very magnificent; but I must take you in this way."

Ronald's hopes fell. It was not likely that Ida could be here; but, on the other hand, it was very probable that his guide had led him here in order to rob him. He wished he had a revolver with him, but he had not thought of taking one when he left London. He felt that he was imprudent to enter the house, but yet he did not like to run even

the slightest risk of missing an interview with Ida. In his pocket he had a large clasp knife, with a blade some five inches long, which had let the life out of many a stag on the Ross-shire and Sutherland hills. "This is better than nothing," he thought, and followed Ignazio into the house. Opening the door softly, the young Italian whispered, "In there, signor, and make no noise."

Ronald walked into a poorly furnished room which contained a bed, a rickety-looking table, beside which sat a young girl with dyed yellow hair and rouged cheeks, and a few chairs standing here and there on the uncarpeted floor. There was no doubt in his mind as to what sort of place he had been inveigled into.

"I thought a lady—a friend of mine—had sent for me," he said, "but I see there is some mistake here, and I will leave at once."

"Ah, no! handsome Signor. There is no mistake. It was I who saw you in the theatre, and my heart was filled with love for you, so I sent to ask you to come and drink a glass of wine with me."

"Thank you for your hospitality, but the hour is late, and I have no inclination to drink anything."

"Only just one little glass," said the girl, taking his hand, "and you will not go so soon—you have not even given me a kiss," and, looking into his eyes, she held up her lips to him.

"I don't like kissing," said Ronald, and he turned to leave.

At this moment the door opened, and the old woman who had watched Ronald at the theatre came in and began storming furiously at the girl, and then turned upon Ronald and upbraided him for bringing dishonour upon her daughter.

"This is nonsense," said Ronald, calmly; "if your daughter has never suffered any other dishonour than that I have brought on her she must be a paragon of purity, and her appearance is cruelly unkind to her."

"Ah! now you insult me too; this is too much; here, Ignazio, look at this villain, who brings disgrace upon us."

The young man entered the room with a dagger in his hand.

"This looks serious," thought Ronald, snatching a shawl which had fallen from the girl's shoulders, and wrapping it round his forearm while he hastily drew his knife from his pocket and opened it.

"I have seen enough acting for to-night at the theatre," he said, "and I don't want to witness an amateur performance. I have been a fool to come here, but I suppose I must pay for my folly. How much do you want to let me go?"

"A thousand lire."

"I am not quite so foolish as that. I warn you that if you make unreasonable demands I shall pay you nothing."

"Well, I will be moderate—say five hundred."

"I have not anything like so much money upon me; besides, I tell you that I will not pay you an exorbitant price for my folly, and therefore you may know at once that if you try to extort such a sum from me I will fight if need be, and I think I am a match for that young fellow even if you hinder me. I will pay you a louis and go."

"A louis! By all the saints, I will not take less than four hundred lire."

"You weary me," said Ronald, taking a couple of louis in his hand, and holding them out to the woman. "Take these and let me depart peaceably, for it is the utmost I will give you."

The sight of the gold altered the old woman's tone.

"Make it three louis, Signorito Mio," she said, in a wheedling voice.

"Two or nothing," said Ronald, growing impatient.

"Ah, just give one poor little louis more, and I will let you go in peace, sure. Only look what a lovely child she is."

"Miserable old devil," cried Ronald, whose Italian vocabulary was rather limited in the matter of expletives, and throwing the gold pieces on the table, he seized a candle and made for the door.

"At least, leave the shawl," cried the old woman.

"When I am outside I will leave it on the pavement," and Ronald passed out, walking down the stair backwards for fear of a surprise, but the man did not attempt to follow him.

When he stood once more in the open street he breathed more freely. As he wandered about trying to find his way, and thinking over his adventure, he found himself once more on the Piazza of St. Mark.

"Here I am *en pays de connaissance* at last," he thought; "and the warning in the proverb has proved to be not altogether unnecessary; but, though sorrow endureth for the night, the morning will bring me a joy to repay me for a thousand misadventures such as this."

When Ronald awoke the next morning he was glad to find that he had slept so long that by the time he had breakfasted it was late enough to call on Lady Atherley. Hastening to Damieli's, he gave his card to the porter, and said he would wait while it was taken up to her.

"But she is not here, sir."

"How is that? I sent a note to her last night, and I was then told that she was staying here."

"Yes, sir, but she left in a yacht yesterday morning, and will not be back for a day or two."

"Where has she gone to?"

"I don't know, sir, but she left a letter, perhaps it is for you."

Ronald took the letter. He felt almost stunned by this news and was unable to open it. Holding it in his hand, he walked and walked not heeding in what direction, till at last he found himself in front of St. Mark's. Entering the cathedral, he sat down in a quiet corner and broke open the envelope. The letter ran thus:—

"You can't think, *cher ami*, how sorry I am to have to go, but the others wanted to go to Trieste, and I could not get out of it. It would have been too nice, seeing you again here, wouldn't it? but what could I do? What a dear, impetuous boy you are, to come all this way at a moment's notice. It is so good of you. I wish I could have stopped you, but when your telegram reached me you must have been starting, so that I thought it was useless to send you a message. Good-bye. Hoping for better times, I am,

"YOUR IDA."

"P.S. — Don't come on to Trieste, as I don't

suppose we shall stop there, and I can't say what our next move will be."

How bitter life seemed to him as he sat there alone in the dark corner of that beautiful cathedral. Then he gazed at the letter which was open before him mechanically, without seeing it, while his thoughts went far away until at last his eye caught some word in the letter, and he re-read it several times.

"She does not, she cannot, love me," he thought, "and yet why does she always draw me after her? Why does she always give me hope? And it is for this that I have tarnished my honour, that I have stooped to the baseness of falsehood, and flung aside my own self-esteem!"

The Patriarch of Venice passed through the cathedral, surrounded by dignitaries of the church and acolytes swinging censers of incense. He saw the look of sorrow on Ronald's face, and paused for a moment to give him his blessing. Ronald bowed his head reverently. How he longed that the Faith which he saw symbolized by so many objects around him might have a real meaning for him. But no! The blessed promise of a future life, where all that is wrong here shall be done away, and where there shall be no heartaches and no remorse, were to him but as the fairy stories of his youth—very beautiful if they only could have been true, but quite beyond the belief of rational men. Then he went to the hotel and wrote a letter to Ida—a mad, passionate letter full of his sorrow, and of his wild love for her—a letter which came straight from his heart. He showed her how he would have thrown over every engagement in the world for her if she had been coming to see him, and how easy it must have been for her to be too unwell to start for another day. In conclusion, he told her that he should never in his life go anywhere to see her again unless she expressly invited him to come.

A few hours later he was travelling back to Munich, and as the train steamed across the Lagoon he gave a last lingering look to the lovely city which he had entered so full of hope but a few short hours before, as

though he expected each moment to see it fade away like his dream of happiness and be lost to sight for ever.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LETTER.

WHEN, after a considerable time spent in deliberation, the Financial Committee announced that the City of Munich Loan was confided entirely to Mr. Pilsener, who had agreed to take it firm at 99, Ronald was not astonished that he should have lost this prize, but he was surprised at the very high figure which Pilsener had offered for it.

That night Von Steudel had invited the three financiers to dine with him.

Pilsener, who had not forgotten Ronald's reception of his offer to compromise the Sandborough petition, could not help showing his satisfaction at the result of his application for the loan.

"It is really unfortunate, Mr. Macleod, that our desires should have clashed again, and that I should not only have deprived you of a seat in Parliament, but that I should also have been successful in getting the means of paying the expenses I have been put to by your petition. It only remains for us to fall in love with the same lady, but if that happens I am afraid I shall not win the treble event."

"I don't know that you are very much to be congratulated even so far. Your first event, as you call it, seems likely to be a failure after all, and a most expensive one. As for the matter of this loan, I doubt if you will clear your expenses of issue with the small margin left by the price you have given for it."

"Ah! there I think you are mistaken, for I fancy I can read the signs of the times pretty well, and I mean to have a very large margin. I shall issue a third of the loan

at par, and, unless I am very much mistaken, it will be applied for ten times over at that figure, and as I shall myself hold a considerable portion of it, a demand for it will spring up at the very first settlement, so that I have very little doubt it will soon run up to ten or twelve premium, and then I shall be able to issue the remainder at a very nice profit."

"You are very sanguine. Don't you think, Herr von Steudel, that Mr. Pilsener is rating the credit of your city rather high?"

"I should think so; but if he is right, it is the last time he will get a loan to negotiate for us, for it is monstrous that he should make so large a profit out of us."

"One such negotiation is enough, my dear Herr Von Steudel, and I am glad to say the agreements are signed now, and your good city may fret over its bargain, but it cannot draw back now. Yes, gentlemen, now that I have the grapes I am not surprised that you should think they must be a little sour."

Ronald's heart was too heavy for him to take much heed of Pilsener's manner, and he deigned not to reply.

Though Messrs. Thompson and Haroldson had been informed by telegraph of the failure of their offer, Ronald felt strongly averse to meet them, and when he entered his office on his return to town he could not avoid showing his chagrin. But his senior partner took him kindly by the hand, and said:

"Don't be down-hearted about this, Macleod. You can't expect to find every transaction in business profitable—at least, we have lost nothing by this failure, and the fact that we were able to tender for the loan will be noised about, and that will certainly be a benefit to us."

When on the 1st November Ronald read in the *Morning Post* the announcement that the Atherleys had returned to town, his heart sank within him as he contrasted the emotion which he then felt with the feelings which this news would have awakened in him if he had never been to Venice. How eagerly he would have rushed off to see her if he had never undertaken that luckless journey. But now he determined that he would not call upon her. No; if chance threw them

together he would speak to her courteously as a mere acquaintance, but he would make no reference to the past, and henceforth he would never see her alone.

But how often when man proposes woman disposes. On his return home that very day Ella came to him, and said:

"You have only just missed someone you would so much like to have seen. Lady Atherley has only left the house about five minutes ago, and if you had not got into the habit of coming home so late you would have seen her. Now, aren't you sorry?"

"No, it is no great loss."

"Ronald, how can you be so absurd? You know you like her, and what is the use of pretending you don't? If I had shown you any jealous feeling about her, you might have thought it necessary to hide your admiration for her, but you know I am very glad to see her. Why, she came here just now to ask us to a little dance which she is trying to get up this day week."

"And have you refused?"

"No, of course I accepted, for I had no engagement, and I felt sure that if you had any, you would put it off to go there."

"I don't like dances."

"Well, but this is only a little one, some fifty or sixty persons, and—but I wish you would not always think it necessary to try and deceive me, for I know how anxious you must be to see her after her long absence from town."

Ronald felt vexed about this dance, and he tried to persuade himself he would rather not see Ida for some time; but the true state of his feelings became apparent to him when he found himself thinking, "Well, I must meet her some day—why not now?"

When the Macleods arrived at Grosvenor Square on the evening of the dance, Lady Atherley received them very cordially.

"So kind of you to have come in this informal way," she said to Ella.

"You have never come to see me since my return," she added in a low tone to Ronald, and the arrival of some other guests relieved him of the necessity of a reply.

Ronald danced but little. At last, when the programme had been half finished, Ida came to him and said :—

“Are you not going to ask me to dance?”

“I thought you would be too much engaged in your own house to spare me a dance!”

“Nonsense—dance this with me.”

“With pleasure.”

As Ronald put his arm round Ida's waist, a young subaltern in the Guards came up and, blushing awkwardly, said, as he struggled with a glove which would not be buttoned—

“I think I am to have the honour of this dance.”

Lady Atherley looked up sweetly into his eyes. “I am so sorry, Lord Moraine,” she said, “but I quite forgot to write down Mr. Macleod's dance, but I have been engaged to him from the beginning of the evening. Don't be angry with me—it is awfully stupid of me, but you must come to me after this dance, and see if we can't arrange another.”

The young Guardsman walked off, and soon succeeded in finding another partner.

“I am surprised that you should think it worth while to throw over your guests for me in this way,” said Ronald, as they waltzed round the room.

“You are angry with me, Ronald. Oh, don't be unkind to me on this the night of our first meeting after so long an absence.”

“And whose fault is it that it has been so long?”

“Ah, you don't understand, you don't know, how I was watched by the people at Venice; I really could not get off that trip to Trieste.”

“This I know and understand, that if you had come half a mile to see me no engagement should have prevented me from meeting you. But what does it matter? I love you, and you don't return my love; it is very simple. Let us be friends, if we can be nothing more.”

“Don't talk like that, Ronald. Come, take me to get some refreshment.”

They went down to the supper room, but as they passed the door of her boudoir, “Come in here a moment,” she said, and they entered the room in

which she had so nearly forgotten herself on that night of the "Holborn" dinner.

"Why do you bring me here?" asked Ronald, as they stood before the fire.

She put her hands on his shoulders, and, looking full into his eyes, she said:

"Because I wanted to ask you here if you had forgotten our past so soon, if you will allow the pique engendered by one seemingly unkind act to mar the happiness of both of us."

He gazed at the shapely white arms shining the whiter upon his black coat, and pressing his lips on one of them, he answered her with a tone of deep sadness in his voice:—

"Pique, Ida! Such a word can have no meaning between us, for it is a feeling of which I am incapable towards you. Sorrow, yes—possibly even anger, who knows? but pique, never! Nor is it one act, darling, which shows me that what is the love of a lifetime on my part is but a momentary caprice with you. Since you have brought me to this room and have not dreaded to speak of the past, you will forgive me for alluding to it. Six months have passed away since that scene took place between us in this very place, and am I one whit nearer calling you my own than I was on that night? Am I not rather much farther from such a crowning of my wishes?"

"And do you think that the mere fact of my having given myself to you would make my heart any more yours than it is now?"

"I hope and believe it."

The door opened and one of the guests came in. "Ah, Lady Atherley, I have found you at last. Our dance is half over, but better late than never."

"I am so sorry, but we cannot hear the music here." Then turning to Ronald she said, "Our next dance is the eleventh, I think." Ronald looked at his programme, which was almost empty.

"Yes, thank you, the eleventh," and he wrote her name on the little card.

During the dances which intervened between the one just finished and the one she had promised him, he felt much bored, for his heart was so full of hopes and

fears that he could scarcely force himself to speak to anyone. At last the eleventh dance came. Lady Atherley was standing near the supper table, in the centre of a group of four or five men, who were vying with each other in their endeavours to say something complimentary to her, when Ronald came to her, and, bowing, said :

“ I think this is our dance, Lady Atherley.”

“ Yes, but you are an old friend enough for me to ask you to let me dance it with someone else. You see, a guest of my husband’s has only just arrived, and as Sir Algernon is particularly anxious that I should dance with him, I have looked down my card to see which partner I could best rely on not to take offence at being thrown over, and I have chosen you—that is, if you won’t be angry.”

“ Of course not,” said Ronald, and bowing again he walked away as if the loss of his dance was a matter of no consequence ; but he felt that on that night, when they still had so much to say to one another, she might have sacrificed someone else rather than him to the exigencies of her husband. But when a few minutes later he stood at the drawing-room door waiting to see who was the lucky man to whom his dance had been given, Ida passed him with her hand on the arm of an insignificant-looking little man, his heart was filled with rage as he recognised the bright complexion and Jewish features of Mr. Pilsener.

“ Ha, Mr. Macleod,” he said, as the crowd detained him and his partner for a moment outside the drawing-room door, “ you have seen in the papers, have you not, my loan is at three premium already, though it was only issued three days ago. You see you were wrong in supposing that I offered too high a figure for it.”

Ronald deigned not to answer. The idea that this foul little Jew should hold Ida in his arms for a moment was sickening to him. He thought he would leave before the dance commenced, but Ella was engaged, and he could not leave her to come home alone.

As soon as the dance was over he found his wife, and they were leaving the room together, when Lady Atherley came up to them.

"Don't go yet," she said, "it is quite early, and you haven't given me a dance to-night, Mr. Macleod; you know you really ought to ask your hostess to dance, and surely you have still some engagements, Mrs. Macleod—now, haven't you?"

"Yes," answered Ella, "but my husband is so lazy at dances now, and he always wants to get home early."

"But he really shall stay, if it is only to give me a dance now."

"I asked you for one before, Lady Atherley, but your card was full."

"Yes, I know; one has to dance with such lots of people at one's own house. But now, if you will stay, I will give you this very dance. Is it agreed?"

Of course Ronald could not leave after such an offer, and he gave his arm to his hostess.

"Come to the boudoir," she said, "or my partner will be looking for me and trying to carry me off."

"Since you had to throw me over for the last dance, I wish it had been for anyone else rather than that wretched little Hebrew. I hope you don't like him."

"Like him? No; he is an odious little brute, but I believe he is to be a sort of Rothschild or Baron Grant some day, and that he is making fabulous sums of money."

"Rothschild—hardly that; a Grant, perhaps; don't you know that he is the man who beat me at Sandborough?"

"No—is he? then I must hate him."

"And when I tell you that while I was idiotically rushing off to Venice to see a woman who did not care two straws for me, he was using the time of my absence to gain over the votes of the Munich Council, and thus obtain the issue of that loan, which is now putting vast sums into his pocket instead of into mine."

"Oh, Ronald, don't say that I have been the cause of your losing large sums."

"I don't say that, and should be sorry if you thought it. I only say that this villainous little Pilsener has been twice successful where I have failed, and that he said it only remained for us to fall in love with the same woman, so that I fully expect he will be at your

feet before long, and it seems to me that his chance of success cannot be worse than mine."

"But, dear Ronald, why are you so impatient? You would not have me throw myself at your head."

"No; but I know that it is not a sense of right and wrong, or of religious duty, which restrains you; and, therefore, I cannot help thinking that if you loved me, you would make no difficulty about listening to my suit; and I feel confident that, if you could but love me as I do you, my life would be so different."

"But have I not told you often that to those who can wait——"

"Yes, but there are limits to human patience. Am I to wait till I have one foot in the grave, or till we have seen our grandchildren settled in life, and then to obtain my reward."

Lady Atherley laughed. "Time and I will hardly be so hard on you as that, but I think I am worth waiting for. See how many great men have waited patiently for the object of their wishes, and their patience has been rewarded at last. Take Napoleon III., a man I have always admired and respected. Look how he waited for years, and——"

"The result of his waiting was Sedan. No, Ida; tell me now, do you love me or do you not? If not, let us meet as friends, but not alone, and I, for my part, will speak to you no more of my love; but if you do love me some proof of your love."

Ronald was holding both her hands in his, and looking eagerly into her eyes, as though he would read the thoughts that were passing in her heart. For some seconds she was silently looking into his eyes. Gently disengaging her hands from his, she took his head and, drawing it towards her, pressed a long kiss upon his forehead.

"I love you," she said, and her words were scarcely audible, "be satisfied."

He drew her passionately to him, crushing the flowers she wore in her bosom, and covering her face and arms with kisses.

"But I am not satisfied," he whispered. "If you do love me, give me proof of your love."

"But you know that I do love you."

"Oh, my darling Ida! how can I thank you enough for these words? But will you grant me one more interview? I have so much to say to you?"

"On Thursday next I shall be alone at Brighton at the Grand Hotel."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, and if I do not keep it never trust me again."

"Oh, a million thanks, my darling pet, my sweet lovely Ida—my queen—my goddess. I have suffered much on your account, and this night I meant to have spoken for the last time of the intense love I bear you, and then to have buried it in my heart for ever; but now, I feel I shall go mad with joy."

"Enough—enough, my dear boy; really my dress is not fit to be seen. My poor flowers are all crushed, and people are likely to come in here at any moment, so go now and good-bye till Thursday."

With one last, long, fervent kiss they parted. On the following Wednesday night Ronald sat up late smoking in his study. He felt that the morrow would be one of the great turning-points in his life. He took up a portrait of his wife—a photograph—taken when she was little more than a child—the one she had had taken for him when they were engaged. Then his thoughts wandered back across the long years of his wedded life, and he contrasted the pure and ennobling affection he had felt for Ella with the wild lurid unholy passion for Ida which now consumed him, and how he regretted that calm pure love of the long ago as he thought of the mistakes, the faults, the heartburnings, and the thousand nameless trivialities which had killed Ella's love for him and laid it in its tomb—never to rise again.

And this new Eros which had risen up in its place—would it bring him happiness? He stifled the voice within him which would have answered, "No."

And then he thought of the morrow—how, in less than twenty-four hours, he would perhaps realize all his dreams—and, as the picture rose before his mind, his eyes glowed with an unnatural light and the blood crimsoned his pale cheeks. He opened one of the drawers in his desk to put away the likeness of Ella—his eye fell upon a manuscript in her handwriting. It

was a journal kept by her in the old days when she first knew him. It was a simple, artless record of a pure and unsullied nature. He turned over the pages and read of their first meetings—of walks in the woods—of a parting in a summer-house. Then followed her resolutions to strive against temptation and to overcome those innocent sins (so heinous in her own eyes) into which alone she had fallen. Then came the entry of their last meeting, the day before he asked her to be his for ever. It ran thus:—

“September 3rd.—The day of days has come at last, that day for which through so many weary months I have longed so intensely. I have seen him again, my king, my love, my life. Yes, he is fairer than the sons of men, his eyes are so wondrous, and I like to imagine the angels like him—and oh, he loves me still—my beauty, my king, he condescends to love poor little me. He said I had grown part of his life; oh, I feel so happy, so very very happy, and yet my darling did not look well. There is a saying ‘Whom the gods love die young.’ It haunts me; but why should it? We know no *gods*, only one God, and He never created any being so purely beautiful, so noble, as my love without giving him some great mission. Oh, my God! thou knowest how weak I am. I want to be Thy servant in truth as well as in name, but, oh, how miserably I fail! Thy banner over me is always ‘love,’ and yet I am not half grateful. And now Thou hast given me this blessed earthly love. Oh, how can I thank Thee for it! But do Thou grant that, however much I love, he may be still only my king, not my God; and do Thou bless him to all eternity.”

“September 4th.—Yes, this has been the happiest day of my life, and oh, what a glorious autumn day it has been! How the sun shone, how the birds sang, how all nature seemed to rejoice, and I have been, oh, so happy, for He, my Love, my King, has asked me to be his wife, his own wife! Oh, the sweet, sweet Sabbath morning, when we vowed eternal faith to each other! That faith seemed to come straight from heaven. How wondrous fair the woods looked!

And then the walk down by the seashore, when the water shone like burnished gold against the soft purple of the far-off hills. I felt too, too happy, and I prayed God to give me strength to love him well, but not to worship him. How often have I prayed that I might not make him my idol, and rather than this to take him from me. Oh! that I were more worthy of his love, but I must try; and, oh! God, help us and bless us both."

He closed the leaves reverently. "And this is what I have lost," he thought. And now he was about to break the vow which he had made to that pure-hearted girl on the day of his marriage, so many years ago. In thought he had broken it before, but not in fact—and now, after it had withstood the temptations of so many years, he was going to fling it to the winds at the bidding of a woman whom he felt he could not trust—a woman who probably had no heart left to give him even if she desired to do so. But he never hesitated for a moment though he felt the wrong he was doing—though he knew that he was giving Ida his whole heart, that he was sacrificing for her all that was good and noble in his nature. He went forth to her as he would have gone to death or to torture for her, without even thinking of the possibility of drawing back.

When he reached Brighton the rain was pouring down steadily, and the muddy streets looked cold and deserted, but dreary as the prospect was, Ronald's heart was full of sunshine, and the dull dreary streets seemed bright and cheerful to him as he drove rapidly through them with the happy consciousness that each turn of the wheels was bringing him nearer to the realization of the great dream which had possessed him for so many months. Of all the passengers arriving at Brighton that night, Ronald was the first to arrive at the Grand Hotel.

"I want a room," he said, hurriedly, to the clerk in the office.

"Very sorry, but you can't have one, as the hotel is full."

"Oh, but I will sleep anywhere—anything will do for me."

"Unhappily, there is no room, however small, which we can give you."

This was an unforeseen blow to Ronald. While he was yet discussing the matter with the clerk, Lady Atherley came up.

"I thought I recognised your voice, Mr. Macleod," she said; "how funny your being here. Are you staying in the hotel?"

"No; unluckily I can't get in, as there is no room."

"Then you must come and dine with us here, and get a room in some other hotel. Will you come?"

"With great pleasure," and he started off in search of another hotel.

"After all, it is, perhaps, safer so," he thought.

Maud Langmore was staying with Lady Atherley. She reminded Ronald of the evening when they had last dined together, and showed him that she had not forgotten some of his quaint sayings; but the mad, happy humour of that evening was wanting to make this dinner as bright as the last, and they all three constantly returned to that evening when they had heard those absurd songs at the "Canterbury," as if they felt that in turning over their memories of that joyous night they might find again some of the happy emotions they had then experienced.

But somehow the conversation lacked sparkle, and the spirits of the party seemed incapable of rising beyond a dull calm level. Ronald asked himself how it could be that on the eve of realizing his dream he should feel a placidity bordering on sadness. Could it be that Ida was repenting her promise, and that he, with that fine sense of sympathy which now existed between them, had divined that repentance almost before she was aware of it herself.

"Sing us something, Maud," said Lady Atherley, as they sat in her sitting-room after dinner.

Miss Langmore sat down at the piano and played Rubinstein's charming little "Melody," with great feeling.

"That is quite lovely," said Ronald, as she finished.

"Yes, but it is sad; and besides, Maud, it is not singing," said Lady Atherley, walking across to the

piano and kissing Miss Langmore's forehead. "Come, now, sing us something livelier."

Maud began to sing, and Lady Atherley came back to Ronald and sat beside him on the sofa. He took her hand, and looked into her eyes.

"What is wrong?" he asked. "Are you sorry that I have come?"

"No, but I do feel unhappy, for I suppose you do not really love me, but that you only fancy me because I am handsome, and you think I am 'a fine woman.'"

"Ida, you cannot think that. Don't you know far better than I can tell you, that I only press my suit so madly because I feel that, if once you could love me as I do you, I would hold your love for ever? My darling, you have promised to give me this proof of your love. Say that you love me, and I swear that I will never again trouble you, unless you give me some sign of your love."

"And what would that prove? Only that possession had killed love."

"Can you suppose, then, that any man, even if he did not love you, could be untrue to you? No, he would long more ardently for you than ever. No, my darling; the very fact that, after all which has passed between us, you have still held back the earnest avowal of your love, is to me a proof that you would never grant that favour unless your heart were really mine and mine only."

"And what would you think if I told you that I hesitate still to take so irrevocable a step?"

"I should say that you have hitherto behaved monstrously to me, for if you love me you cannot hesitate; and if you do not, then how can you have allowed our past?—how can you have asked me here to-night?"

She crept close to him and putting her head upon his shoulder said, "But I do like you awfully—I may learn to love you."

Ronald, who had felt half frightened at the turn the conversation was taking, was overwhelmed with delight at her last words, for he had staked all his happiness on this passion for her, and now at last he had won her. For a second he folded her in his arms. Miss

Langmore ceased her song, and Lady Atherley drew herself away quietly, so that Maud should not hear the rustle of her dress.

"Thank you, dear," she said. "I liked that last one so much"—with a meaning glance at Ronald—"just one more before you get up." Maud sang one more.

"You must say good-night to us early, and then I can send Maud off soon. You can wait till she is safe in her room and then come back here. Leave your gloves, so that you can have an excuse for coming back in case you were seen—and now, Ronald, promise me that you will leave me directly I ask you."

"I swear it."

Ronald soon took his leave, and went down to the billiard-room to wait till Miss Langmore was gone. When he returned to Lady Atherley's sitting-room, he found the room in darkness; but the door of the adjoining room was not quite closed, and a light shone through. He pushed the door open half timidly. Ida had changed her dress for a white peignoir, trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons. Directly she saw him she came forward with both her hands stretched out to him. He caught her in his arms and pressed her to him, as he murmured, "At last!"

But she pushed him gently from her.

"Dear Ronald," she said, softly, as she held his hands, "I am going to ask you a great favour."

"Any, my darling. Whatever it may be, I will grant it most willingly."

"Then leave me now."

"Oh, Ida! how can you ask that? And your promise—you have not kept it yet. Let me stay one hour with you, and then I will go."

"No, no, Ronald; go now, at once."

"But why did you let me come back if you intended to send me away at once? is this the proof of love which you promised me?"

"It was because I gave that promise that I let you come. It would have been easy for me to lock my door, but I wished to be kind to you. Now do go."

Ronald could not believe his ears.

"And your promise?" was all he could say.

"Oh, if you insist on that," said Ida, her affectionate

manner changing and turning suddenly cold. "Well you may stay; but not because I love you, but because I have foolishly promised in a thoughtless moment that which I now look upon with distaste."

For a moment a cloud of anger swept over Ronald's soul, and he thought :

"I will hold her to her promise, come what may. She has fooled me long enough. Why this change in you?" he asked, almost fiercely; "I know you have no religious scruples. Do you fear discovery? or what is it that has made you lead me on as if you loved me, only to send me away now?"

"I don't know. I feel I would rather you went away now. Do go, like a good dear fellow. I might be compromised here. Some day I will be good; wait yet a little while."

Ronald felt the veins swelling in his forehead. He hardly dared trust himself to speak.

"I go," he said, "since you send me away, but remember, Ida, I go to return no more," and he hurried through the sitting-room. She hastened after him and caught his arm as he was passing out into the passage.

"Stay, Ronald," she said, coaxingly; "you are awfully kind to me, but don't be angry; you must love me—poor me—nobody loves me. I don't know why it is, but I feel sick to-night. Fatal infatuation! Some day you shall feel the loyalty of my affection and honesty of purpose in speaking as a true friend."

Ronald did not answer. Her last words cut him to the heart, and he went out into the night, his hopes shattered and his dream broken.

It was a stormy night, and the waves were thundering upon the beach. He walked down beside the sea, where the spray fell upon him, and watched the angry waters as they roared and hissed upon the shingles. For more than an hour he stood there, while a flood of bitter thoughts poured in upon him, and he almost wished that the black waters at his feet would roll on and overwhelm him and Ida. Then he thought of Ella and those pages of her journal which he had read before starting for Brighton. And for what a woman had he neglected his wife—risked his worldly career and tarnished his

honour? For her he—a Macleod—had stooped to lie. He had given her his heart; and what had he been to her after all?—a sop to her vanity, perhaps even less than that.

He returned to his hotel and went to bed; but he could not sleep. He felt that this night was a turning-point in his life. All the hopes, the longings, the most ardent desires of his nature were crushed and driven back into his inmost soul.

The clock struck two. Ronald remembered Napoleon's saying, that "two o'clock in the morning courage" was the only true courage, and he resolved that, cost him what it might, he would show Ida that he possessed that courage, by breaking for ever the shameful chains in which she held him. He rose, and taking pen and paper, wrote as follows:—

"IDA,—I have waited until the anger which your conduct had roused in me has subsided, before writing you this letter; but as it is probably the last communication which will ever pass between us, and as it is possible that my disappointment may influence me to write what I should after careful reflection regret having written, I will not send it to you until I have had ample leisure to think over its contents. You are no doubt congratulating yourself that this night has not been passed as you may have expected, and possibly you take credit to yourself for your virtuous conduct; but know that after what has happened before between us, I consider you as much my own as if you had left husband and home for me, only that, had you done that, I might have honoured you as a woman who followed the dictates of her heart, instead of regarding you as one who, from vanity or from some lower passion, will lead a man to the brink of a precipice, without having the courage to plunge in with him.

"If you had been in such a position that the actual necessities of life were wanting to you, and you had behaved to any man as you have to me, I should have pitied, even though I despised you. If you had been kept by a sense of religion or of duty from taking the step which you had promised to take to-night, I should have honoured you; but when you do all in

your power to lead a man to love you—when, for the mere pleasure of having a slave at your beck and call, you simulate a love you do not feel and permit a degree of intimacy which, where there is no love, should be repulsive, what can I think of you? In looking back over these months which have gone by since we first met, what have I done for you? Have I not given you my whole heart? Have I not again and again done violence to my better feelings? Have I not lied for you? It is an ugly word, Ida, but have I not lied systematically, unblushingly, for you? Have I not accepted favours at the hands of your husband, whom I designed to wrong, though I would cheerfully have cut off my right hand rather than submit to this degradation? Did you not know that at any moment I was ready to risk my worldly position, my fortune—nay, my life for you? And what have you done for me in return? You have given me some happy hours; you have encouraged me to hope and to wait; twice I held you in my power; twice, I repeat it, I proved my honest affection for you and I waited; and what is the result? what is my reward? You promise me that some day if you feel in the humour, and I happen to be at hand, you will make use of me to gratify your vanity and insatiate desire for display. I am writing plainly, perhaps brutally, Ida, but I am writing for the last time, and I wish you to understand what I feel.

“If we meet again, as we probably shall, you will be Lady Atherley for me—for the Ida I have dreamed of, loved, nay, worshipped, exists no longer. If it pleases you to cut me when we meet, do so; but I think, for the sake of appearances, it would be better to let our acquaintance die a lingering death. Good-bye. If you should ever be in great trouble, remember that for the sake of the love I once bore you I will be your friend; but of love I will never speak to you again. I hope and trust it is dead within me for ever; but if in the hereafter I should find that it lives still, you shall never have the satisfaction of knowing it.

“Yours once, yours no longer,

“RONALD MACLEOD.”

By the first train in the morning Ronald returned to

town. Two days later he re-read his letter and posted it. Lady Atherley and Miss Langmore were talking about him when it arrived.

"How odd of Mr. Macleod going away like that, without either telling us he was leaving or writing to explain it," said Maud.

"Well, you see, dear, I said something to him which he did not like while you were singing the other night."

"Yes, you said so; but I should think twice before offending a man who was so fond of me as he must be of you."

"My dear child, what does it matter? I have only to give him a sign and back he will come to my feet in a moment."

His letter was brought in.

Ida read it with her face averted, but she could scarcely repress her anger enough to hide it from Miss Langmore. With an effort she calmed herself by the time she reached the end of it.

"What a ridiculous fellow he is," she said, laughing, as she folded the letter and thrust it into the bosom of her dress. "I told you he would soon get over his huff. Why, if I could only show you this letter—it is the wildest thing imaginable."

But when Lady Atherley reached her own room, and read Ronald's harsh words again, she could no longer contain her vexation, and the tears rose to her eyes, as she said:

"You shall pay for this, Ronald; you shall come back to lick the dust at my feet like a beaten hound, though it cost me my life to bring you there."

CHAPTER XX.

VICTORY.

THREE weeks elapsed before Lady Atherley and her lover were brought into contact with one another. Their meeting took place at a dance, but though they had not seen each other Ida had left cards on Mrs Macleod in the interval, and therefore Ronald came forward and greeted her much as if nothing had happened between them.

He would rather not have asked her to dance, but he thought that his not doing so would attract remark. She gave him the dance he asked for. He had intended to make no allusion whatever to their past, but to speak to her as he would to any lady whom he had met for the first time, but she soon led him on to more intimate subjects.

"Have you repented of your unkindness to me?" she asked, suddenly.

"I am not aware of any unkindness on my part, Lady Atherley. I thought that at our last meeting you told me to go, and I obeyed your orders."

He felt a certain kind of bitter satisfaction in calling her Lady Atherley, while he knew that he might have called her by that name of Ida, which she had reserved especially for him.

"Don't be absurd, Ronald. You know quite well that you were cruel to me. Your letter was worse than cruel—it was brutal. It was such a letter as no gentleman should ever have written."

"Possibly so; but since it has ceased to exist for so many weeks, it would be wiser for you to forget all about it, as you have probably forgotten all the nonsense I spoke to you when I loved you so madly."

"But it has not ceased to exist; I have kept it, and ever shall."

"That is very imprudent, and I don't see what end you can gain by it. You say it hurt you, then why not destroy it at once?"

"It is chiefly because it hurt me that I shall keep it. If ever I feel tempted to be kind to any man again—if ever I begin to fancy that some man really loves me—I shall read that letter, and from that moment I shall steel my heart against him, and think, 'After all, he may only be another Ronald Macleod.'"

Ronald was silent.

"You do not say that you regret having written it," she continued, "but the time will come when you will repent bitterly the pain which your letter gave me."

Ronald shrugged his shoulders.

"I regret already that I have caused you pain," he said, sadly; "but I did not see how it could be avoided, and I knew that at the worst it could only be momentary. No, Lady Atherley, I felt that I must write strongly, or otherwise you would believe that my letter was due to a fit of ill-temper rather than to a determination at which I had arrived after much deep and painful reflection. If that letter caused you pain to read, think what I must have suffered before I could write it to one whom I had loved so fondly as I did you."

"As you did? You mean as you do still?"

Ronald shook his head sadly.

Lady Atherley's partner came to claim her for the next dance, which was just beginning.

"We shall see," she said archly, as she laid her hand on her partner's arm and moved away through the crowd. Several times, as they passed one another in the dance, their eyes met, but they did not dance together again that night.

"What is the matter?" asked Ella, as she and her husband drove home together; "you only danced once with Lady Atherley to-night—have you been having a quarrel?"

"Her card was filled up before I asked her to dance."

"I thought that made no difference with her, and that she would always manage to find two or three dances for you."

"At any rate she did not to-night."

Ronald had dreaded this first interview, but he was well satisfied with himself, for Ida had been ready to forgive him, and he had avoided asking her forgiveness. He felt that each time he met her without a reconciliation taking place, the easier it would be for him to carry out his determination to free himself from her chains.

During the next few weeks the Atherleys and Macleods saw little of each other. When they did meet, Lady Atherley once or twice tried to talk to Ronald of his love for her, but he would only speak of it in the past tense, and then she would tell him how worthless it must have been if it could pass away so soon; but such taunts were lost upon him, for he knew that in her heart she had been convinced of his love and could not doubt it for a moment. At first Ida was piqued by this great change in her lover, and determined to bring him back that she might punish him; but as time wore on, and she saw no signs of his returning to her, she began to think whether she had not really treated him very badly, and whether she had been wise in allowing a man who loved her so devotedly to drift away from her. "There are hundreds of others as good as he," she would say, with a haughty air, but in her inmost heart she felt a sad longing to have him at her feet, to look into his eyes and hear his passionate pleadings.

Meanwhile Ronald had been doing all in his power to drive his unfortunate passion from his mind. He had worked hard at his office during the day, and spent his evenings in preparing and delivering political lectures to working men, but, though he did his utmost to avoid brooding upon his sorrow, there were moments when his dream would come back to him with a painful distinctness, and then he would be almost tempted to seek out Ida and say to her:

"Forgive me—let me only see you and speak to you as I used to, and if you cannot be to me what I would wish—if you cannot give me your heart—I will take anything you like to spare me. I will accept any position, I will be your slave—only let me sometimes feel that you care for me, let me sometimes press my lips to yours."

But when such feelings rose in his breast he forced them back ; and once, when she wrote and asked him to lunch *en tête à tête* with her, and added, " Do come, I am so anxious to see you," he telegraphed an excuse, and did not go.

Meanwhile the Sandborough Election Petition had come on for hearing, and Ronald's presence was necessary in the Court. As it was likely the case would take some days, Ella went to stay with some friends near London, and Ronald took up his headquarters at the Sandborough Hotel.

Fausterley, who had seen with dismay the change in the relations which existed between Ronald and Lady Atherley, was a constant visitor at the house where Ella was staying. He had always hoped that Ronald could have eventually persuaded Ida to elope with him, and he felt that, if such a thing should happen, Ella, who could not bear to be alone, would accept his offer of protection. But now he saw that his hopes were likely to be defeated, and that, if he were to win her at all, he would have to persuade her to leave everything for him, a task which might not have been very difficult when the knowledge of her husband's flirtation with Ida was rankling in her bosom, but which would become almost impossible if Ronald succeeded in conquering the passion which was widening the breach between his wife and himself.

Fausterley, therefore, was unremitting in his attentions to Ella, and he had so far succeeded in gaining an ascendancy over her that he knew he had only to bring her proof of Ronald's guilt in order to win her. He might have fabricated proofs, for, had he invented some circumstantial story it is probable that it would have obtained credence, especially if there were some small modicum of truth in it, but he was convinced that, however his friend had sinned in intention, he was still innocent in fact ; and, with a curious inconsistency, while he was basely betraying a friend from whom he had received the greatest kindness, he yet shrank from resorting to a downright lie to further his designs. The evidence in the Sandborough Petition had been most carefully prepared, and the Conservative case was irrefutable.

When the hearing was concluded, no one in the court had any doubt as to what the result would be, but the judge, finding that the hour was late, reserved his judgment till the next day.

Ronald, who was anxious to return to town as early as possible, but would not return home until the decision had been pronounced, took the train to London, leaving word with his agent that a telegram should be sent to him at the Charing Cross Hotel as soon as the decision was known, so that he might immediately take the intelligence to Ella.

It was about six o'clock when he reached town, and having dined he went to the Globe Theatre to see "La Belle Normande," which had just been brought out at that house. When Ronald entered, the first act had commenced, and Mr. Paulton was singing, "He was such a nice young man," with that irresistibly comic expression which makes even the most vapid nonsense appear funny when he sings it. Elated with the success of the petition, and amused at the song, Ronald felt lighter-hearted than he had been since that night at Brighton. The song ended, he leaned back in his stall and glanced round the house. Suddenly he started involuntarily, and his pale face became yet paler, for there, within a few yards of him, sat Ida. She was leaning forward, with her shapely arm resting on the velvet cushion of the box, and her eyes fixed intently on him. When their eyes met she smiled, and nodded to him kindly.

From that moment Ronald found it impossible to pay any attention to the stage, and if there had been any plot in "La Belle Normande," he would have been utterly unable to follow it. When the first act was over, Ida waited till Ronald looked at her, and then she whispered, "Come."

Though of course no sound reached him, he fancied he heard the word, but he pretended not to understand, and so remained in his place. But after waiting a few minutes she sent Sir Algernon to invite him into the box.

"I did not expect to see you here to-night," said Lady Atherley, as she pressed his hand, "for I should have thought that you would have remained at Sandborough to hear the result of your petition."

"Well, of course, I ought to have stayed, but though the decision has not yet been given, I have no doubt it will be in my favour."

"I congratulate you with all my heart," said Sir Algernon.

"And so do I. How pleased Mrs. Macleod must be," said Lady Atherley.

"She has not heard the good news yet, for I know that the unforeseen may always happen, and, therefore, I have not been home yet; and, indeed, I am staying at the Charing Cross Hotel for the night, so that, as soon as the decision has been telegraphed to me, I can hasten home and surprise my wife with the intelligence before it can reach her in any other way."

"I do envy her to-morrow morning. How awfully pleased she will be. Is not Mr. Macleod a model husband, Algernon, to prepare this surprise for his wife?"

"Well, I hope he is," laughed Sir Algernon, "but I hardly think the fact of his coming up to spend the night alone in town is quite sufficient to prove it."

The curtain drew up, and Ronald rose to return to his seat.

"You will come and see us after the next act, won't you?" said Ida, looking back over her shoulder, with one of her sweetest smiles, as he opened the door.

"Thank you, I will."

As soon as the curtain dropped again, Ronald hurried round to the Atherleys' box. Sir Algernon and a friend who was with him were just leaving it.

"Come and have a cup of coffee with us," he said, but Ronald declined the invitation, and joined Lady Atherley.

As soon as he sat down beside her, she took his hand.

"Ronald," she said, "I have behaved badly to you, I know, I have led you on to love me with all your heart, and I have given you but little in return. But give me one more trial, be to me as you have been, and I will prove to you that I am not so worthless as you think me."

Ronald shook his head sadly.

"And has your love for me so soon vanished?" she asked, putting her face close to his.

He met her eyes steadily, and murmured "Yes."

"It is false," she said, quickly, "you love me still; this is some foolish resolution of well-doing, one of those momentary impulses to which we are all subject at times; but I know them, they do not last, and within a few hours you will repent having denied your love and come back to implore pardon. Am I not right, darling Ronald?" and she put her head upon his breast.

He pushed her gently from him. "No, Lady Atherley, you are not right," he answered. "I have loved you with my whole heart, and I have suffered, and still suffer, for that love. But it is past. I bear you no ill-will; I have no unkind thought of you. May not that suffice?"

"No," she answered, almost angrily; "you think you know your own heart, but I will teach you that you are as much my slave as ever you were."

A tap at the door announced the return of Sir Algernon.

When the play was over, Ronald once more caught a glimpse of the Atherleys. It was snowing fast, and the difficulty of getting cabs kept the audience longer than usual at the entrance. Ronald waited till his friends drove off, and then turned to look for a cab for himself. But the streets were almost empty, for the snow had fallen so heavily that most of the cabmen had gone home. Ronald, therefore, determined to walk to the hotel. As he passed the Gaiety Theatre, where the people were just beginning to come out, a slap on the shoulder made him turn round.

"Why, I thought you were at Sandborough," said Fausterley—for it was he who had accosted him—"but come up to Scott's and have some oysters, and tell me all about it."

"That's too far; it is such a wretched night."

"Why, I enjoy this; it seems so new to me. But, never mind; come into the Gaiety bar, we can have some oysters there."

The two friends walked in together, and over their supper Ronald explained how matters stood with regard to the petition. When their repast was finished, Fausterley accompanied Macleod to his hotel.

"Come into my room, and warm yourself for a minute."

Fausterley accepted the invitation.

"And how about the fair Lady Atherley?" he asked, as he leant against the mantelpiece. "I suppose you will let her know of your success as soon as possible."

"She knows already. I told her to-night."

"Hallo! Then things are going *bon train* in that quarter?"

"Yes, to a certain extent they are, for I have had the courage to tell her that my passion for her is over."

"What! when she has never been yours?"

"Yes. And that she has not been mine is perhaps the greatest consolation I have in this unhappy affair."

"Well really, old chap, you are one of the most extraordinary beings I ever came across. But you look tired, so we must talk about this another time;" and with a hearty shake of the hand Charlie Fausterley took his leave.

Meanwhile the Atherleys had driven to the Conservative Club, where Sir Algernon had promised to meet some friends in order to discuss the advisability of having a banquet before the new session opened.

Lady Atherley, after leaving her husband at the club, had almost reached home when an empty cab passed her. She stopped the carriage, "Call that cab," she said to the footman, who had instantly jumped down and stood at the carriage door. The cab drew up and Lady Atherley entered it.

"Where to, m' lady?" asked the footman, with his hand to his hat and his face as impassive as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a lady to leave her carriage at midnight and take a cab instead.

"Take the carriage home."

"And where shall I tell the cabman to go, m' lady?"

"I will tell him."

"Yes, m' lady," and the footman resumed his place and was driven off.

"To the Charing Cross Hotel," said Lady Atherley. When she reached the hotel she walked up to the porter's desk and asked the number of Mr. Macleod's room.

"It is too late to see him now, madam.

"But I must see him. It is a matter of the utmost importance."

"But he will be in bed, madam."

"No matter, he is my husband."

Fausterley, who had just entered the hall, had heard the last words of this dialogue, and recognised Lady Atherley. He hastily drew back into the shadow of the passage, and when Lady Atherley passed him without noticing him he followed her up the stairs.

When she reached the landing on which Ronald's room was situated, a chambermaid who was standing there asked her what room she wanted.

"No. 89. Is the gentleman in?"

"Yes; but ladies ain't allowed to visit gentlemen in their rooms in this hotel," said the maid, with a sneer.

She took no notice of this remark, but the maid put herself in front of the door.

"Stand aside, idiot," said Lady Atherley, scornfully, "I am his wife."

The chambermaid drew back, and let her pass.

"So, so," thought Fausterley; "and this is the man who rejoices over the purity of his flirtation—who comes to town a day earlier for his wife's sake. And how he has deceived me all through. But I am glad of it; it makes the deceit I have practised on him a trifle less distasteful."

And he went out into the snow, his brain seething with new projects and hopes.

When Ida entered Ronald's room he was sitting in an armchair before the fire, clad in a warm dressing-gown. As she closed the door behind her he started to his feet and stared at her as a man might stare at some supernatural vision.

"Good God, Lady Atherley!" he said, "what are you doing here?"

"I have come to you," she said, quietly.

"Why?"

"Is this the way to receive me?"

"Surely you are mad—go; for God's sake don't stay one moment. Your name—your reputation—will be irretrievably lost. I implore you to go."

Ida took off her opera cloak and flung it on a chair.

"No," she said, "not yet. You told me to-night that your love for me was past. I told you you were wrong. I told you that you would ask my forgiveness for having spoken such heresy, and I am here to grant you that forgiveness."

"By the love I bore you, Lady Atherley, I implore you not to prepare for yourself a life-long regret, but go now, before it is too late."

She sat down, and began taking off her gloves.

"It is comfortable and warm here," she said.

He took her cloak and placed it on her shoulders.

"Think of your name," he said.

"How should I think of it when you seem to forget it? Don't you know that there is no 'Lady Atherley' here; only 'Ida,' your own Ida."

He stood by the mantel-piece; and for a moment both were silent.

"Do you know you are but an indifferent host, *mon ami*; is this Highland hospitality?"

"Oh, won't you go?"

"No, not if you send me from you like this."

She rose from her seat and put her arms round his neck, and as she looked into his eyes her lips moved, as if inviting a kiss, but he moved not an inch towards her; and when, an instant later, she pressed her lips to his, she found them cold and motionless.

"Do you know," she said, as she nestled close up to him, "that I never expected to see you so indifferent toward me. Perhaps I have been cruel to you, but if I have I am sorry."

Ronald was silent.

"You know I liked to see you so mad as you used to be, and to know that I could play upon your nature as one plays upon a musical instrument; and when I saw your protestations of love, I confess that I liked to feel that I was the one woman toward whom you had an honest regard." She added, in a voice which was scarcely audible, "I don't think that you have ceased to care for me."

A deathly pallor had overspread Ronald's face, and his whole frame trembled with the violence of his emotions.

"Oh, Ronald, you used to kiss me so lovingly, to

plead to me so passionately, and now that I have come to you, have you no kiss for my lips, no word of love for my aching heart?"

"Ida, have you no pity? I know you never loved me, but this is more than I can bear? Why do you come to me like this. If you had loved me you would have come long ago, but now it is too late."

"I know I treated you ill. But your love was dear to me; your passionate words were like music to me; and look, rather than lose them I have risked reputation and everything to come to you to-night. I don't know if I ever loved you, I don't know if I can love, but I will show to you that I am not a heartless coquette. And now tell me you love me still."

"No, Ida, that is past for ever, I cannot be satisfied with less than your whole heart."

"At least give me one of those mad kisses before I go."

"No, no, Ida, do not ask it; I cannot, I must not kiss you. Henceforth I shall never kiss a woman again save as a brother may kiss a sister or a father his daughter."

"Just one kiss, Ronald, one little tiny kiss, and I will go. Ha! you dare not trust yourself, for you know that you still love me, you know that it is not so easy as you may think it now, to forget the past—the past...."

She sank on her knees at his feet.

"Here, Ronald, here, on my knees. I, who never begged a favour of any man, I beg your forgiveness."

"No, Ida, it cannot be," he said, as he strove to raise her.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and drew herself up to her full height. Her eyes seemed to flash fire, and her lips, from which all the colour had departed, were drawn back tightly and showed the faultless symmetry of her pearly teeth as they glistened in the firelight. Her right hand was stretched forward menacingly to within a few inches of his face.

"Fool—cursed fool!" she hissed rather than cried; "you have trampled on a woman's love. You shall learn the full measure of a woman's hate," and, seizing her cloak, she rushed from the room.

Ronald stood for a moment motionless, listening to her footsteps as she hurried along the passage; and then, taking her glove, which had fallen on the floor, he pressed it to his lips in a long burning kiss, and, sinking back into a chair, he buried his head in his hands.

Pulling the hood of her cloak as far as possible over her face, Lady Atherley ran down the broad steps out into the night. She paused for a moment to call a cab, but not one was within the station-yard, so she hurried on into the Strand. The snow was still falling fast, and an unwonted stillness reigned over the dreary scene. Scarcely a vehicle of any kind was passing, and those few which glided noiselessly by were all occupied.

Still Lady Atherley waited, hoping to find some means of getting home. A drunken fellow, with an extinct pipe in his mouth, came rolling by. He stretched out his arm and encircled her waist. "Goo' night, ducky; sorry can't shtop, got a p'tiklar 'gage-ment."

She pushed him away, and he fell in the snow. Then while he swore at her, and tried to find his hat and pipe, she gathered her cloak closer around her and ran straight before her. Onward she sped—stopping whenever any shadowy vehicle came looming through the snow, and then when each new hope had given place to a fresh disappointment, she started forward again, until at last, worn out with fatigue and vexation, she reached her own door.

"Bring me some brandy and soda," she said to the footman who opened the door, and, going into the dining-room, she flung herself into a chair.

While the footman was busied preparing the drink, Sir Algernon walked into the room.

"You can go to bed," he said, turning to the footman.

"No, not yet; he is getting some brandy for me—I am ill," said Lady Atherley.

It was a terrible moment, that. The footman, who felt that his master and mistress were anxious to be rid of him, bungled with the soda-water bottle, broke the cork, and was obliged to use a corkscrew. At last he handed her the glass and withdrew. She put it to her lips and took a long draught.

"Where have you been?" asked Sir Algernon, while his eyes rested on the satin dress, all stained and crumpled by the snow.

"Where have I been?" repeated Lady Atherley, slowly rising and moving towards the door. "I have been out," and, flinging the door open, she ran down the passage and tried to shut herself in her boudoir; but her husband was too quick for her, and before she could lock the door he had forced it open and stood over her. She crouched down upon the sofa, while he locked the door after him.

"Where have you been?" he asked again, with enforced calm.

"I don't choose to tell."

"But I insist on knowing," said Sir Algernon, with difficulty keeping down his anger.

"Oh, you insist, do you; very well, then, you shall know, and much happiness may the knowledge bring you. I have been to the Charing Cross Hotel; and do you wish to know why? Well, then, I went to Mr. Macleod's room to tell him I loved him; and now are you satisfied?"

Sir Algernon fell back as if a shot had struck him. His wife had spoken in a low sullen tone, and she sat there gazing fixedly before her. He clenched his hands nervously, and walked once or twice across the room.

"Since you own your shame thus openly," he said, "I shall go to-morrow to my solicitors."

"Go to the d——, if you will," she shrieked, springing to her feet and speaking rapidly in a sudden access of fury—a passionate outburst in which the pent-up feelings of the last two hours found vent.

"Poor miserable dotard," she went on, "you think I have owned my shame, do you? but you shall hear it yet. Yes, I have been to him, and I, Lady Atherley, have offered my love to him. Nay, on my knees, I have begged him to give me his love; and he has spurned me from him, and driven me out into the gutter."

As she finished speaking, she flung her arms into the air and fell heavily to the ground. She had fallen with her left arm under her body, and her head far back. Her husband looked at the outstretched throat, and his hands twitched ner-

vously, while a hideous thought flashed through his brain. But it was gone in a moment, and he took a vase of flowers from the table, and emptied the water from it upon her face; then he knelt beside her and chafed her hands. At length her eyes opened, and she stared vacantly before her.

"How dark it is," she murmured, "where am I? Oh yes, I know," she continued, dreamily, "I told you and then you struck me here," and she put her hands to her forehead. Sir Algernon was sitting in a chair, his brows knit together and his eyes fixed upon her with a glassy stare.

Struggling to rise, Lady Atherley knelt with her face buried in the sofa, moaning as if in pain.

"He would not even kiss me," she said, speaking to herself, and altogether heedless of her husband; "and yet I love him so—and oh, my God! how I hate him, for he was cruel, so cruel. If he had only taken me once in his arms, then afterwards I would gladly have died. Oh! to be his for one short hour, to feel his kisses as I felt them here in this room. I would give my life—ay, and his, too."

"Adulterous woman," cried Sir Algernon; "you shall leave this house to-morrow, and I will thrash this miserable paramour of yours."

Lady Atherley staggered to her feet once more—

"D—— coward," she said, while a look of the deadliest hate stole over her features; "you would not dare to touch him."

"We shall see that, madam."

"Yes, we shall see," answered Lady Atherley, and opening a secret drawer in the *bonheur du jour* which stood there, she drew out a paper and held it towards her husband. It was an old letter, in his own handwriting, a portion of which had been burnt. As soon as he recognised it he sank back into his chair powerless.

"And you knew this?" he said.

"I knew it," she answered, coldly; "let us have no more recriminations, and no more threats," and placing the fragment in the bosom of her dress she unlocked the door and went to her room.

The next morning Charlie Fausterley rose early. He packed a small portmanteau with great care, and

having breakfasted, he took a cab and drove to his bankers, where he drew a cheque for £100—which left his balance in a very attenuated condition. Then he asked for a pen and paper, and wrote a note to a friend who shared his chambers with him.

“DEAR ATWOOD,—I am hurriedly called away. Don’t give my address to any living soul ; but, if any important-looking letter comes for me, forward it to me at the Hotel du Grande Monarque, Brussels.

“Yours faithfully,
“C. F.”

Then he put it in his pocket and looked at the clock. Only a quarter-past ten ; still half an hour before Mrs. Macleod’s train was due at Victoria. He strolled down to the station as slowly as possible. Still ten minutes to wait. He walked into the refreshment bar and ordered a brandy-and-soda. He looks very pale, and the kind-hearted barmaid gives him a liberal allowance of brandy. A moment later the train is steaming into the station.

Ella caught sight of him, and he came to open the door for her. How kind of him always to come and meet her, she thinks, and yet she has made up her mind to say something that will hurt him.

During those bright days she has been spending in the country, the fresh air has done her good, both physically and morally, and she has thought to herself that perhaps she has been in some measure to blame for her husband’s present infatuation ; and then, as for Charlie, she has been letting herself like him far too much. He is always with her, and she knows that he loves her and is always wishing—wishing—then is she not wrong to encourage him ? She will not send him away : no, that would be ungrateful ; but she will tell him that he must never come any more except by Ronald’s invitation, and that he must never speak to her of love again. And then she will go to Ronald and warn him that he is risking his own happiness and hers, but that she is ready to forgive everything, to try to make herself more necessary to him. She feels now that she should have spoken to him

long ago, and but for her pride she would have done so—ah! she was very wicked to let that foolish pride come between them, for she was sure Ronald was good at heart, and really fond of her, however much that odious woman might have drawn him away from her.

“You don’t look well,” she said, as she alighted on the platform.

“Oh, I am all right, but I have something to tell you. Come into the waiting-room, it will be empty now, and as there is a good deal of luggage we shall have time to get yours afterwards.”

Half-frightened at his earnest manner, she follows him into the waiting-room.

There he begins at once.

“You told me I was mean in betraying Ronald. Perhaps you only half-believed what I told you, and you asked me for proofs. I have been mean—I own it; and I would undertake any action, however repulsive it might be to me, in order to gain you. But now chance has given me the proof you desired of me.” And then he tells how Lady Atherley had passed as Ronald’s wife at the Charing Cross Hotel.

“Oh, Ronald!” she mutters, “how can I keep myself true to you when you are so ready to fling me aside for the first woman who cares to flatter your vanity?”

Then Fausterley pleads to her passionately. All the love that has been growing in his heart rushes to his lips. Why live out a miserable existence with a man who slights and neglects her, when there is another ready and willing to make a goddess of her—to look upon her as the Alpha and Omega of his existence?

She stands there mute—irresolute—her hands in his. And then in her mind begins that fatal comparison between the husband and the lover, which is so dangerous to a woman’s peace. On the one hand, a man who is cold, indifferent—kind enough at times, perhaps, but only when there is no other woman there; a man who makes her feel at every moment that she is only the second—who has to be reminded two or three times that she wants something before he can remember to get it.

And then, on the other hand, a man who is all

devotion and tenderness, who is quite blind to the charms of any other woman, and seems to have eyes for her alone; and then how gentle he is—how considerate; almost before a wish is quite formed in her mind he has interpreted it; why even Ronald has told her she would be very ungrateful if she did not like him for all the kindness he has shown her. Then why let this man suffer, when she can make him happy by leaving a husband who will forget her existence a few days after she is gone? But then comes the doubt—what if this story of the hotel were not true? She turns to him—

“Charlie, you say you would be guilty of any action to get me; how can I know that what you have told me is true?”

“You doubt me,” he answers, while a look of triumph lights up his eyes, for he knows by her way of asking the question that his victory is near at hand. “Well, I like it better so. Come with me, and I will give you proof.”

The luggage is put on a cab, and they drive to the Charing Cross Hotel. Ella has tied an extra veil over her face. She leans on Fausterley’s arm, for she feels that, in spite of her efforts to keep calm, her knees are trembling.

“Is Mr. Macleod here?” asks the young man, as if it were a matter of no importance.

“No, sir; he got a telegram about a quarter of an hour ago, and he paid his bill at once and went away.”

“You don’t know where he is gone?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you tell me if Mrs. Macleod was with him?”—he feels Ella’s hand clutching his arm convulsively.

“Yes, sir—well, that is to say, she came to him last night, but she didn’t leave with him—so, perhaps, she went away while I was off duty; but I’ll inquire.”

“Oh, never mind. I only wanted to know if she was in town.”

Ella seems almost stunned; she drives back with Charlie to his rooms, and remains in the cab while he rushes up the stairs and fetches his portmanteau. No compact is made between them, no plans are decided upon, but when he takes her back to the station, and

has their luggage labelled for Brussels, she speaks no word of resistance, but goes with him mechanically as one walking in a dream.

Meanwhile what of Ronald? There was no need to open his telegram, for was it not addressed to Ronald Macleod, Esq., M.P.? He, too, had made resolutions during the long sleepless hours of the night. He would be different to Ella. He would be so kind and attentive to her, he would give her more amusement. Then he would work hard—he would make a name that she should be proud to bear; and as for his sin (for he owned to himself that in heart he had sinned deliberately, almost without a struggle), well, it had brought him more suffering than pleasure, and she need never know of it, perhaps it was already buried and done with. Of course his heart was broken, and no woman could ever be anything to him again, but he would bear his sorrow in secret, and no one, not even his greatest friend, Fausterley, should know that he ever thought more of it than as a momentary folly. When he reached home his first question was:

“Has Mrs. Macleod arrived?”

“Not yet, sir, we expect her every minute.”

He was glad to be home before her, he would give her such a warm welcome and tell her of his success. After half an hour he began to feel rather uneasy. Then he remembered the heavy fall of snow. Of course, she might be an hour or two late; perhaps the train might even be blocked. He went into his study and took up a book. The first that came to his hand was an old favourite of his, “*Les Contes Drolatiques*,” of Balzac. He opened it at “*Le Succube*,” and read of this *démon ayant visage de femme*—an amiable and a not altogether unlovable *démon*—many things which reminded him of Ida. There were the descriptions of her:

“*Ung pied plus mênue que n'est licite à femme vraye de l'avoir, et d'entendre sa voix qui virvouchioyt au cueur. . . . Pensant à ceste gracieuse et foyble femme, dont les bras luy sembloient naguères trop mignons pour soustenir le légier poids de ses chaisnes d'or. . . . Elle ha tout le feu de l'enfer en son giron, la force de Samson en ses cheveulx et apparences*

de musicques célestes en sa voix. . . . [Les] attraiçts magiques de sa personne supernaturellement amoureuse."

Then the love that she inspired:—

"L'ayant aperçue, avoyt esté feru pour elle d'ung grant amour. . . . I'escoutoys la musicque de sa voix, laquelle me reschauffoyt de la teste aux pieds et me faisoyt treuver que, pour une heure passée en sa compaignie mon heur éternel n'estoyt qu' une foyble solde des plaisirs de l'amour goustez en ces bras mignons. . . . Je n'avoys nul soulcy des chouses de ce monde, ni des intérêts de Dieu ne resvant que d'amour."

And now all was over. The *démon* of the story had given love for love, passion for passion, but Ronald had been able to get no deeper with Ida than her feelings of vanity, or perhaps to awaken in her a transient wave of desire. He closed the book, and for a moment abandoned himself to sad reflections. Then he thought of his wife. He began to feel uneasy about her, and walked to the station to inquire about the trains. There he learned that the delay had amounted to a very few moments.

"She will have started by a later train," he thought, and then he waited for the next to come in. But when it arrived he scanned the carriages eagerly in vain. He was disappointed, but no fear assailed him. He supposed that she might have been persuaded by her friends to stay till the afternoon, or perhaps even till the next day, and that he would have a letter or telegram before long. If anyone had hinted to him the real fact, he would have received the suggestion with scorn and incredulity.

He returned home to lunch, as he thought a telegram might be awaiting him, and he determined that after lunch he would go down and fetch her unless she turned up in the meantime. She would like the attention, and as he had arranged not to go into the City that day, he could easily afford the time. It was disappointing, though, that he would not be the first to tell her of his success. He had finished lunch, and was just filling his cigar-case, when a servant came in with a letter.

"Here's a letter from missus, and I do hope there's nothing wrong with her, for it's in pencil."

The maid stood waiting while Ronald opened the

letter, for she was deeply attached to her mistress, and the unusual appearance of the letter frightened her. Her master's face was turned away from her, and she could not see the fearful pallor that overspread it as he read the letter. It was written in pencil on the back of a portion of his last letter to her, and ran as follows :—

“I KNOW all—your coming to town when you led me to believe you were at Sandborough; your stay at the Charing Cross Hotel *with your wife*. But this is not written to reproach you. I am sure you have often wished to be rid of me. Your wish is granted. Be very kind to the children, for, remember, they have been guilty of no sin. Try to think of me as I used to be before you made me the foul thing I am, and then imagine that I died before I took this fatal step.

“ELLA.

“P.S.—I am not alone.”

A deadly sickness came over him as he read the words, but he retained enough presence of mind not to let the maid discover his emotion.

“I hope there is nothing wrong, sir?” she asked.

He laid the letter down upon the table and finished filling his cigar-case, while he answered with a calmness that surprised him :—

“Your mistress is not very well; she may not be back for a day or two, but no doubt she will write again to-day. I will let you know if she does.”

Then he went into his study, and with the letter spread out on his desk he sat and thought. At first all seemed confusion in his brain. Thoughts of vengeance against his false friend (for he never doubted for one moment that he had been betrayed by Fausterley)—of his own shameful passion for Ida—of the time so long ago now when Ella and he had been all in all to one another—thoughts where a half-formed picture of his last interview with Ida was strangely blended with a memory of the scene in which he had first vowed to Ella that to her he would be true for ever and ever—thoughts wild, tender—now hazy, and now minutely distinct, rushed

through his mind with maddening rapidity, leaving him conscious alone of a sense of intolerable pain. The hours passed and still he sat there, until at last he realised that man must do as well as think. But what could he do? Track down the villain who had been the instrument of his terrible punishment and shoot him down like a dog? Pshaw! the days of duelling are past. Even if he succeeded in finding Fausterley, was it likely that this man would care a rap for the effete laws of honour when his heart was so devoid of all honourable feeling. True, he might break his whip across the scoundrel's face. But what satisfaction could the infliction of a trifling physical pain upon his rival give him? Would that bring back his honour?

And Ella—what of her? He did not blame her. No; he felt that he had been guilty, that he alone had brought this punishment upon himself. Had he not neglected her, slighted her for another woman? And now, when he remembered how all his feelings and wishes had been confided to a traitor, he owned that, if ever one wrong can excuse another, this wrong of Ella's might be excused by the greater and far more deliberate wrong which he had striven for months to accomplish. But it was not the past alone that occupied his thoughts—more awful still the future loomed before him. If Ella, by her rash act, had brought his punishment upon him, how far more terrible still would be her own expiation of that punishment. For if Fausterley could act so treacherously to him, how would he keep troth with her? And then he pictured her in that inevitable moment, when possession should have cooled her lover's passion—when, abandoned by him, she would be cast penniless and friendless upon an unforgiving world.

“I must save her from this,” he cried. “I am the cause of all this misery, and at all hazards I will save her.”

In a moment his resolution was taken. Then a great calm fell upon him, and he seemed to see everything with wonderful clearness. Unlocking a drawer in his desk he took out his

will and read it. It was a very simple document giving her everything he possessed during her lifetime, and after her death dividing it between his children. He now made a codicil revoking her interest under it, and giving her £300 a year for her sole and inalienable use. Then he wrote down a full statement of his worldly affairs, explaining exactly how matters stood between himself and his partners, and adding a few brief directions as to the education and advancement in life of his son, and, sealing up the paper, directed it to his executors. He next drove to his solicitors, and, having signed the codicil, left the will with them. After that he went to his bank and drew a cheque for two hundred pounds, and then returned home. This money he placed in an envelope directed to Ella.

“She will find it convenient when she comes back,” he thought, as he placed all the keys beside it and shut his desk.

The dressing bell rang.

He knew that he could not eat. He rang for the servant.

“I am going to dine out,” he said, “but I shall not be late. See that the bath-room fire is lighted, as I want a hot bath.”

Then he went out and wandered through the snow whithersoever his feet led him. He was oppressed by the unusual stillness. The few horses which were floundering along knee deep in the snow drifts seemed like phantoms, so noiseless was their progress, and the voices of the occasional passers-by seemed deadened by the cloud of minute snowflakes which filled the air. The cold was severe, and the streets seemed almost deserted.

Suddenly Ronald stopped. He was in the Buckingham Palace Road, passing the very spot where he had overtaken Ida and Miss Langmore in the cab many months before. There he had jumped out in the mud, and taken her hand for a moment. Vividly the scene rushed back to him—it seemed that the cold and the snow, and the darkness had given way, and that he was standing once again in the glorious sunshine—his heart full of gratitude and hope. Then all was dark and cold and dreary again.

The hours dragged wearily along, and still Ronald walked and walked. For a moment he stood on Westminster Bridge, and looked into the black water. "It looks very cold," he thought, "I should not like to go out through that door."

Presently he remembered his new dignity. How strange it seemed to him, as he looked at the Houses of Parliament and remembered how anxiously he had desired the right to sit there, and, now that he had obtained it, he was never to exercise it.

"And I suppose I am what the world would call a 'successful man.'"

The clock struck the half-hour past ten.

"It is time," he said, and he started off at a brisk pace towards his home.

When he reached the house he sent the servants to bed. Then he went to the bathroom and placed a small table beside the bath. Upon this table he laid his cigar-case and a copy of the Koran—it happened to be the first book that came to his hand. Then he brought two bottles of champagne and a glass, and, having taken off the wire, he went to his dressing-room. Opening a small case, he took out a lancet and tried the edge on his hand. It was very sharp, but still he drew it once or twice along his razor-strop. He looked at the veins in his wrist. The cold had numbed them, and they were scarcely visible; then he turned down one of his socks. The saphena vein was swelled from his long walk. "That will do better," he thought. He felt no fear, no repugnance, at what he was about to do; he knelt down and prayed:

"Oh God! if thou art, and if thou hast power, have mercy on me; have mercy on us."

"Perhaps I am praying to the winds," he thought. "Who knows?" And then "perhaps I shall in an hour or so——."

He was returning to the bath-room, when a cough attracted his attention. It came from his daughter's room.

"Yes, I will see her once again," he thought, and a pang shot through his heart as he remembered that his boy was away at school, and that, therefore, he had

seen him for the last time. He pushed the door open noiselessly, and stood beside his child's bed. The fair little face lying there, surrounded by a cluster of golden curls, brought back so forcibly the memory of that morning when he had awakened and seen for the first time the innocent face of his child-wife lying beside him, that he stood gazing intently at it as if spellbound.

The child opened her eyes.

"Is that you, father? Kiss me." And she held out her arms to him, and when his lips touched her a happy smile lighted up her face for a moment, and then she was fast asleep again.

Hitherto his thoughts had been only of his own misery and Ella's future. Now he thought of the fair young life before him—a life destined to be blasted at the very outset. How would it fare with her?—when her father had died by his own hand, and her mother was an outcast and pariah? But no—that at least would be avoided, for when he was gone Ella could be an honest woman, lawfully married to her lover. And yet, what if in her remorse at first hearing of his death, Ella were to take some step which should for ever damage that fame which he was dying to save. Or what if Fausterley should refuse to give his name to the woman he had dishonoured? How easy death seemed to him in that moment, but he felt that he had no right to die.

"No," he thought, "I must make one effort for both their sakes, I can always die if that fails."

Then he crept back to his room, and, locking away the lancet, he returned to his study and wrote to his wife:—

"MY DEAR ELLA,—Do not fear to read this letter. I shall not add one reproach to the burden which your mad act will entail upon you. I know you, Ella, and I know that you must have been mad when you consented to do what you have done. I could say much to you to show you that your sin will inevitably bring misery upon you; for though Charlie may be all love and devotion to you now, and though you may believe that his love will last for ever, I know that the time will come when he will feel that you

are a drag upon him, that you are keeping him away from all respectable society, that you are hindering him from making a figure in his profession, and then the very magnitude of the sacrifice which you have made for him will be a constant though silent reproach to him. And can you place much reliance on a man who to win you has not hesitated to stoop to the basest treachery towards a man who has never shown him anything but kindness? For, remember, his has not been alone the treachery of destroying the home of one whom he was wont to call his best friend, but to do this he has not scrupled to betray secrets which were confided to his keeping.

“But it is not by pointing out to you the unhappiness which will fall upon your own head that I hope to save you from utter ruin. You say in your letter: ‘Be very kind to the children, for remember, they have been guilty of no sin.’ And will you not remember that too? Will you not save your daughter from the disgrace of being the child of an outcast mother? Some day that stain may deprive her of that happiness which every girl has the right to hope for. Will you not have pity on your child before it is too late? And it is not too late, Ella. Come back to me. I know how much my sin is the cause of yours. Come back, and I will never embitter your life by one reproach. Him, of course, you must give up entirely and for ever, but I will try my utmost to lighten your suffering. Perhaps you will hesitate on account of Lady Atherley, but I swear to you now—in this moment of bitterest sorrow, when my heart is so crushed that I am incapable of hiding one thought from you—I swear that with her I have been guilty in thought only, and not in deed. I know it will be hard for you, who have heard of her visit to me at the hotel, to believe this, but I tell you that on that occasion I did not even touch her lips, but, on the other hand, I said ‘Good-bye’ to her for ever.

“To-morrow I leave for Paris. I will stay at the little hotel in the Rue Jeanne d’Arc, where we passed two days last year, and I will give out here that we are taking a trip to Spain. If you join me within a fortnight the worst, at least, may yet be saved; if not,

all is lost. If you have any difficulty in getting away, let me know where you are and I will come for you, and, in that case, I promise not to injure him. You see I am ready to sacrifice everything—even vengeance. Will you not come ?

“RONALD.”

He sealed the letter and took his pen to write to Fausterley, for he knew that it was through him alone that he could reach Ella ; and then the fearful thought came upon him, “She is in his arms now at this very moment,” and then his resolution almost failed him. But soon this thought followed, “It is I who placed her there,” and he wrote thus to Fausterley :—

“I AM not writing to characterize your conduct. Your own conscience will tell you more plainly than I can how vilely you have acted. No, I am writing to ask something of you. Will you give the enclosed letter to her ? She need not fear it, it does not contain one word of blame for her, but only tells her those things which it is necessary for her to know. If you are so mean as to refuse this request, I trust you will at least send the letter back to me unopened. Do not fear that this is a trap to find you out. You can enclose the letter to a friend in London, and have it posted to me there, if you dare not give it to her.”

He placed this and the letter for Ella in an envelope, and wrote “Important” on it, and directed it to C. Fausterley, Esq., leaving the address blank. Then, having removed the traces of his intended crime, he threw himself on his bed, and passed the night in a state of feverish anxiety. All seemed dark and hopeless before him ; nor could the thought that he had acted generously, and sacrificed every feeling and wish of his own heart in order to save Ella and their child, bring him one ray of comfort. The next morning Ronald drove to Fausterley’s chambers. He found Mr. Atwood—who shared them with him—at breakfast.

“Can you give me Fausterley’s address ?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t like to, for though I have it, he has

asked me not to give it to anyone. Of course, I know he couldn't mind your having it, but as he said I was not to give it to any living soul, I feel I ought not to let even you know it."

"Oh, all right; never mind about it, but I have a letter here which he ought to get without delay. Can you forward it to him?"

"He shall have it by to-morrow. But how awfully seedy you are looking. Have you been ill?"

There was a pause, during which he did not answer. He stood looking out of the window, and wondering what chance there was of his letter ever reaching Ella. Would Fausterley give it her, or would he tear it up undelivered, and so put an end to all hopes and possibilities of a reconciliation?

"You are looking really seedy," repeated Atwood. "Won't you have some refreshment?"

"No, thank you. I am rather knocked up with the excitement and worry of my election petition."

"Oh, yes, of course. I saw it in the *Globe* last night. I suppose I must congratulate you, though I rather lean to the other side."

"Thanks," said Ronald, and attempted a smile as he shook hands with Mr. Atwood and left the room.

"He didn't like it," thought Mr. Atwood; "how absurd to be so touchy."

* *

And so ends the story of this unhappy passion. Well might Macleod in his anguish call aloud in the words of Balzac, which I have quoted in the title-page, "Where is the flower of my life?" To many of his friends he appeared a fairly prosperous man, working hard for his family. They noted whatever vivacity he used to possess had completely deserted him, and that his conversation was dull and uninteresting. Ronald is most assiduous in his attention to his Parliamentary duties, and has not missed a single division since he took his seat. His maiden speech, on the Irish Land Act, was not brilliant, but it was characterized by clear good sense, and Mr. Gladstone

professed himself willing to accept the amendment which he had proposed.

He makes a most useful member, and pays great attention to the local interests of the borough which he has "the honour," as he says, of representing in Parliament. He frequently visits the Home Office, the Local Government Board and the offices of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in support of local claims or with a view to the removal of local grievances.

He has ceased to cherish any ambition or confidence in his own ability. He knows perfectly well that he will never rise above the level of dull mediocrity.

The Atherleys and Macleods do not meet often, but when any chance brings them together the ladies are most cordial in their greetings, and even in their hearts neither bears any particular ill-will towards the other. Ronald is always on the look-out to do some service to Sir Algernon, in order in some measure to wipe out the wrong he once was tempted to inflict upon him, but there is a coldness in Sir Algernon's manner which keeps the men apart.

The friendship that once existed between them can never again be resumed. The irrevocable past cannot be forgotten, and the phantom of by-gone days is ever before them when they meet, chilling them with its ghastly presence.

Lady Atherley has danced a great deal this season with Lord Marchington, and she is perfectly sincere when she tells him that Mr. Macleod is very dull and bores her awfully.

Charles Fausterley sailed for Calcutta in the early spring, and has commenced practising at the Indian Bar, with every promise of having a fairly successful if not a very brilliant career.

And of the Macleods' home life, they see as little of each other as possible; for, though each is willing and anxious to forgive and forget, yet their wounds are so recent that not a day passes without some word, some look, some gesture, which touches one or other of them to the quick. Already the children, with that terrible intuition which makes them notice all things we would rather leave unobserved, are beginning to realize that there is something wrong between their parents,

and that father and mother are not to each other what they used to be. Unhappily, all the relationships are uncomfortable. Here is a prospect of one of those wretched homes which resolves itself into two partisan camps, and great, indeed, is the tact and *savoir vivre* which makes life possible under such circumstances. Now that Fausterley is gone, Ella misses the comfort of having someone constantly about her whose chief thought was to please her, and who lavished on her a thousand little attentions, which she scarcely noticed at the time, but which nevertheless added greatly to the pleasure of her life. For a time she assiduously accepted all invitations, and sought a distraction which she soon found unbearable. And now, in the long, dreary days she learns the truth, which she had never realized before, that her heart had been given to him long before that fatal moment when she travelled to Brussels under his protection.

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